

# Sorting the Past: the Social Function of Antique Stores as Centers for the Production of Local History

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As centers of material culture and storytelling, antique stores are useful sources for writing local history. Through interviews with store owners in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, this article attempts to understand the purpose and function of antique stores, and to serve as a guide for how local and regional historians might consider using antique stores to aid their own research. It argues that material objects, buildings, places and stories are necessarily linked in telling local history.

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History comes in many forms. It can be read as fine black text on a sheet of white paper, heard at grandmother's table, seen on the landscape, felt in the erosion of footprints on a wooden floor. Whatever its source, knowledge of the past grounds us, gives us identity, and connects us to others both past and present. And although thinking about the past is always an individual pursuit, it is necessarily a communal activity, teaching us to sympathize with others, to imagine where we fit in the story of a family, a community, a nation. But squeezing the historical discipline into classrooms and museums, we have made the study of the past a formal process, removed from everyday life, divorced from its communal role. Antique stores are sites for an alternative folk history rooted in material objects, local stories and communal values. The history that is learned (or that can or should be learned) at antique stores challenges some major academic premises: that history is best learned through text or as structured chronology, or that the political, economic and military events of the past supersede in importance social or cultural patterns. Historians looking for such things at antique stores will surely be disappointed, but historians who respect material culture and memory studies will discover that antiques stores

are a prime venue for recovering the history of ordinary people, what E.P. Thompson popularized as ‘history from below’

At antique stores, place, material, people and stories are connected in a dynamic whole. Although historians must necessarily select what to include in their tales, a more thorough history requires that none of these four elements be left out. Without location, objects and actors, there can be no story. The historian and anthropologist Jan Vansina explains that cultures traditionally use objects like wampum beads or buffalo skins to help remember historical stories, which are embedded in the materials, and need to be drawn out by appointed scribes or elders.<sup>1</sup> Stories connected to objects contribute to provenance and help to sell an object when meaning provides value. When an antique store owners points to a spindle-framed bed for sale, she links it to a local nineteenth century manufacturer. The bed is no longer just an object, but a locally made object, rooted in the local past. Studying the antique store building and the objects for sale, we learn about the people behind them, and listening to their stories, we learn about the community and its history.

Through interviews with antique store owners and a reading of the material culture of their shops, this article offers a perspective on the social function of antique stores. It demonstrates how people, through antique stores, can build, create, learn, imagine and invent historical knowledge together in a community. Interest in antiques is more than materialism or consumerism, but also a source for building relationships.<sup>2</sup> Ethnographic fieldwork, local history from the ground up, can never exhaust the knowledge of a community, but such fieldwork is most effective when it focuses deeply on a few representative cases. Instead of testing hypotheses in the manner of the social science historian, with surveys or census data, ethnographers begin with qualitative empirical data and build up to generalizations.

For this study, I spoke with dozens of antique store owners in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley during the fall of 2014 and spring of 2015, but I focused on a subset of these informants, largely because of their willingness to participate in this project, but also because of their storytelling abilities and because they were personalities I admired. Interviewees included Sarah Little of ‘Out on a Limb’ in Churchville, Virginia; Michael Healy and Gloria Fridley, owners of Alpha & Omega Antique Mall in Mint Spring, Virginia; and Paula Morris of Dream Haven Studio near Mt. Crawford, Virginia. I do not take the pretense that I have studied these individuals, but I have learned from them. They know more about antiques and antique stores than I do. They also know infinitely more about their communities than I do. They have shown me that antique stores are more than centers of commerce, they are material culture libraries and performative sites for stories of local history.

A study of material objects in an antique store shows us that the local past is not best understood as a set of distinct events, one leading to the next, but as a concatenation of overlapping trends, patterns and traditions. Styles disappear and reappear in time. Likewise, historical events are not over and done, but constantly reverberate like ripples on a pond. In writing local history from the objects in an antique store, then, we must resist the urge to organize everything chronologically. The Italian historiographer Momigliano recognized an important distinction

between history as a narrative sequence of political events derived from the documentary record, and history as a systematic accumulation of non-events: traditions, productions, folklore. In the first conception of history, 'the event' is central, and we link events, place them in order, to tell history. This is the history of the classroom, and to give certain antiques more importance, more value, we try to link them to the historical events taught in classroom history. Momigliano provides inspiration, however, for a more humanist study of the past, which, recognizing the individual and the collective, incorporates physical, material culture, to see long-term non-events, like the gradual changes in trends and mentalities of common people.<sup>3</sup> Like antiquarians of the eighteenth century, we can get at the history of the folk through the study of writings on coins, writing fragments, writings undigested by earlier historians. More so, we can also affirm that knowledge of the past comes material culture objects.<sup>4</sup>

There are plenty of writings on antiques. A large bulk of this literature consists of buying guides designed for an elite audience interested in rare, expensive items such as silver dinner sets, fine paintings, colonial furniture and Oriental rugs.<sup>5</sup> But, folklorists and material culture scholars have also written on more common kinds of antiques, usually with a focus on a particular product, a maker, a tradition of production or the social or ethnic context of production.<sup>6</sup> There is also a growing literature of studies of collecting, particularly from sociologists and anthropologists who view objects as carriers of cultural values that shape individual identities.<sup>7</sup> Among these strands of writings, there is surprisingly little agreement about what an antique is. Certainly, the definition of an antique has changed over time. In the early twentieth century, for example, antiques and antiquities were closely related terms describing overlapping species of old objects. Both were rare, important items, and F.J.H. Kracke, the federal U.S. customs appraiser, could use the two words, 'antiques' and 'antiquities', essentially interchangeably in the same paragraph.<sup>8</sup> In time, as larger numbers of Americans became collectors, antiques as a category expanded to include less expensive items. Writing in 1961, Ann Kilborn Cole lamented the growth of third-rate junk shops and the 'dwindling sources of true antiques' or 'genuine museum-type antiques' she found in a 6500 mile antiquing trip along the Eastern seaboard.<sup>9</sup>

While high value remains a necessary element of the definition of antiques today, many maintain that antiques are defined by age, that they must be man-made objects of at least-hundred years of age.<sup>10</sup> By this definition, most of what is for sale in a typical American antique store is not antique. I define antiques not as merely old things, but as valued, artificial productions that inspire us look to back to the past.<sup>11</sup> Leon Rosenstein has a similar view, but I think he is mistaken to further restrict antiques to 'handcrafted' objects, or to 'beautiful' things, or to non-souvenirs. Antiques also include trinkets for collectors, cheap tools for the handyman and decoration for the front-yard gardener. They meet a range of sentimental, utilitarian and esthetic values. Age is a common denominator that affects value in this market. In general, age appears as wear and tear, and contributes to the diminished utility of an item. Only in the modern age, argued the Austrian art historian Alois Reigl, did 'age-value' take its place alongside intentional esthetic and utilitarian value as a concern of the consumer. The birth of age-value, the value of

something because of its pastness, is concomitant with the rise of antiques in nineteenth century England and the United States.<sup>12</sup> An antiques buyer may find esthetic value in a bucket, a shovel, or a wheelbarrow that was originally built with utility in mind. Only at an antique store, however, is authentic age typically a valued quality, something potentially prized above utility.<sup>13</sup> At thrift stores or pawn shops, on the other hand, newness is generally a desirable quality in an object. By stressing antiques as a link between present and past, I believe we more accurately define them according to the actual habits and popular, albeit unarticulated, understanding of the majority of Americans who buy or sell them.

While the literature on antiques is substantial, articles on the function and purpose of antique stores are quite scarce. In one of the more thorough studies, Briann G. Greenfield has described the birth of antiques as consumer goods in twentieth century New England. Old objects, once prized for their association with family history, became valued for their esthetic features and ability to confer social status.<sup>14</sup> In a similar way, Deborah Cohen describes the role antiques played in satisfying a materialistic desire and in shaping a social hierarchy in Victorian England. In the forward-looking progressive currents of the early twentieth century, antiques provided a chance to look back with nostalgia and demonstrate refined taste.<sup>15</sup> A cultural geographer, H. Jason Combs, demonstrated the regional and national reach of individual antique stores through compiled ZIP code data of sales purchases.<sup>16</sup> The anthropologist, Peter Bleed, used fieldwork interviews in the antiques market in Lincoln, Nebraska, to demonstrate the networks of pickers, dealers, matchmakers and ‘surfacers’ (those like auctioneers and garage salers who provide new items for the used market) responsible for the healthy functioning of the market. Outside of the role of antique stores as a source for museum objects, however, Bleed seems quite unconcerned with antique stores as sites of historical memory in a community.<sup>17</sup> Although he asks us to ‘Consider the entire American environment as a historical museum’, Thomas J. Schlereth unfortunately omits antique stores when he writes:

Since I teach American urban, architectural, and cultural history, much of the evidence for these aspects of our past are, understandably, found in museums, historical societies, living-history farms, towns, and cities, as well as in libraries, archives, municipal record offices, and academic lecture halls.<sup>18</sup>

The Shenandoah Valley is rich in museums, folklore and institutions that teach history. A thriving market for historical appetites also operates through dozens of antique stores. Many of the antique stores in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley do not advertise and cannot be found on any web search. There are, I am told, seven such dealers in Churchville, a village west of Staunton, Virginia. Wanting to learn more about the local antique market in Churchville, I stop at an antique store at the center of town. The building’s exterior walls are made of brick, warm orange-red of color, laid in neat rows. Chairs, buckets, tools, spill out of the front door and lie about the porch, as if signaling passing motorists that this is indeed an antique store. Inside and out, the store has, to me, the proper degree of disorder befitting a community market.

The front door swings open, and I step in and greet the owner, Sarah Little. ‘Is the pipeline going to run right through your store?’, I ask with a half-smile. Like everyone else in Churchville, Sarah knows all about the pipeline that Dominion Power, an energy provider, intends to build against local objections. Sarah tells me precisely where the pipes will be laid. At first, I am hesitant to ask her for an interview. I am an outsider, we have not met before, and maybe she will think I am a surveyor. Instead, I nose around the store, pick up a classroom photo from the 1890s, and walk it back to Sarah. I point out that half of the children in the photograph are shoeless. Intuitively, she asks me if I am a teacher, and here is my chance. Without hesitation, I respond by telling her that I teach history at James Madison University and that I am writing an article about antique stores and how they connect to the community, about how people can learn local history through antiques. I then ask if she would she tell me about herself and the store. ‘Gladly’, she responds. I dart back to my car, and return with a notebook and pen. Learning history from the stories people tell, I step into the shoes of an ethnographer.

Sarah’s confidence is striking and her no-nonsense view of the world instantly wins friends. Although in this first meeting she does not show interest in being recorded, she speaks candidly about her personal life, and is open to her story being told. I begin by asking Sarah about the name of the store, ‘Out on a Limb’. She says that the name reflects her feeling of striking it out alone, 2 years ago, when she started the business. After she left her husband, she was looking for a new path. She had no money. She did have some experience running an antiques booth at Alpha & Omega Antiques, and she still operates a booth at the Verona Antique Mall. Just as important as her experience in the industry, Sarah knows about the area and its people. Although she lived many years in D.C., she was born and raised in Churchville. Sarah says the local antiques market is now oversaturated, over-competitive. Many in the area, struggling in the recession, saddled by the burden of health care costs, turned first to food banks, then struck out on their own, opening small businesses to make do.

Sarah Little’s corner shop inhabits a building that was first a grocery store when the brick was laid a hundred years ago. In the past 15 years alone, the property has been a pool hall, a video store, a used furniture store and a saddlery. ‘Like for horse saddles?’ I ask. She nods. Narrow, deep and tall, the building and its dimensions inspire questions from curious visitors. Sarah fills the store with objects she finds at auctions. She also repurposes, or, as she clarifies, ‘re-creates’ art.

As we continue to talk about the store and its history, I discover that like many antique store owners, Sarah is a local historian who collects old stories as well as old objects. She tells me that Route 42 used to be a toll road and that many of the roads in the area were only one lane until the 1960s. While Sarah and I chat, she busies herself moving objects around the store and welcoming guests. I sort through a bowl of old photographs and negotiate a price for four of them. I catch a great story when I am about to leave. Sarah tells me that a short time ago, a customer bought an old wagon wheel, which he was going to use to protest the pipeline. He planned to make a sign reading: ‘The pipeline is going to be 4 inches bigger in diameter than this wagon wheel’ (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1 'Out on a Limb' closed during a January cold spell, with the porch antiques huddling together.

The façade of Sarah Little's store is immediately recognizable as a site for buying antiques. In studying antique stores, I believe it is essential to consider first the places and spaces they occupy. Seeking a proper setting for discussion of the past, antique stores almost always inhabit pre-existing structures and take advantage of the historical element present in the built environment. Consider the buildings in this study: a 1906 brick church in the countryside, a 1970s roadside lumber warehouse, an early twentieth century converted dairy barn and a turn-of-the-century village grocery store. Deliberately chosen by the owners for the façades and floorplans, these buildings inspire visitors to ask historical questions. When was a building built, what was it used for, why did its purpose change over time? These questions provide inroads to further conversations about change in the community. With the store as an active, open, public space, one need not be a member of the community to access stories of its past.

Architectural design defines historic space, evoking a sense of the past. The location, then, provides the antiques an imagined historical context. One great example can be seen 20 miles from Churchville, in Rockingham County, where Paula Morris has converted a countryside brick church into an antique store with a private living space. Paula calls her store 'Dream Haven Studio'. I ask Paula about the name. Why 'Dream Haven?' The name is personal, Paula explains,

PM: Did you ever have a dream, I would love to have an old barn to renovate, or an old cabin, shack to renovate, old church to renovate? And when this one came available, in a strange kind of way[...]People should have a place to dream, and a haven is a safe place,

true? So what do you name it? A dream haven. Does it make sense? It's a dream haven because it's a fun place to dream. It's a church, it's a haven.

Paula has hit on one of the essential elements of the antique store building: it allows for the imagination to consider the past. The character of antiques develops partially in the relational context between the objects and their setting.

Having renovated the building, Paula knows well its physical dimensions. The present structure is one contiguous 38 × 43 foot space, with an additional 350 square feet added to the southern third of the interior by way of a free-standing timber-framed loft. The brick building dates to 1906, and replaced an earlier wooden church on the site. The church was built by a Baptist congregation, which held services there until the 1950s, when the building transferred hands to a Mennonite congregation. I visited the church and sat down with Paula in December, 2014, to record her story.<sup>19</sup> She explained that the historical aspect of the building drew her in. Her choice of a site was personal and purposeful.

PM: When this floor is empty you can literally see where the pews sat and the where the scuff marks of the rows of feet were. And the pulpit, you can literally see the minister's footprints worn right into the floor. Who would to sand that away and make it look new? No, I bought the building because it was old.

Spaces are defined not only by their physical features, but by the stories that connect them to the past (Figure 2).

The building is the foundation for a collection of historical stories that help Paula engage with the community. Although she has done some archival research on the history of the building, much of what Paula knows about the place comes from visitors to the store. 'The Mennonite community', she says 'they come in here and tell me all kinds of wonderful stories about this happened here, this happened there, my grandma met my granddad here'. By preserving the church building and inviting people there to shop for antiques, Paula has also inspired the community to tell its stories. Personal histories linking people and specific events to the location give meaning and character to the building. One of the most compelling stories Paula offered me was that of a black snake in the church. Paula tells it this way:

PM: And there's this story of about, and it was Mennonite, and all the people are setting here, and he's preaching about whatever, and the congregation starts going beserk, especially the women, and the minister is like, you know. A black snake had crawled out of the mantel up there and was dangling down. So they clear the church, and they turn the bench up on end, and this young man, I think his name is Nathan, crawls up and gets the snake and takes it out, right. One day this little man, you know, he's like this tall, and bent over, and snow-white hair and everything, cobalt-blue eyes, walks in here, and starts tearing up. It was Nathan. It was the man who had gotten the snake when he was a kid.

Paula's rendition is powerful for its range of emotions. First, she establishes a general timeframe (the Mennonite era of the church) and a setting (a church service). She begins with an element of mystery and suspense, as the women are agitating and the minister is blind to the commotion. The story has also inverted the power



FIGURE 2 The entrance to Dream Haven Studio.

roles in the congregation. In this scenario, it is not the minister who knows the truth, but his congregation. The suspense builds with tension as she introduces the black snake. This tension is resolved with the action of young Nathan. The return of an aged Nathan changes the emotional pitch again. Now it is nostalgia, now it is longing or sadness for the passing of the years. Through this story, Paula has linked herself to the Mennonite congregation, to a distinct event, to a distinct

place in the church (the mantel), and to a range of effecting emotions. The colors in the story are memorable: a black snake (perhaps against the white background of the church walls), the cobalt-blue of Nathan's eyes, his snow-white hair. As those who experienced the event pass on, the memory will survive through Paula, and through her store it will live on in the community.

Like Sarah Little in Churchville, Paula Morris grew up in the area around her shop, moved away and later returned to open an antique store. Paula was born and raised in nearby Sangersville, and lived 25 years in Richmond. Like Sarah, Paula is also a local historian. Her stories reach back into the times before she was born, but they primarily tell of the changes in the area in her lifetime. In our discussion, she tells me how the jousting tournament at Natural Chimneys, a local landmark, was once a major event, that she used to find arrowheads in the nearby creek, and that the gravestones in Mt. Crawford need to be cleared of overgrowth. Her stories also deal with the near past, as it ties into the church property. She tells me, for example, that the neighbor's cows got loose on her property one evening, and when the neighbors arrived on loud four-wheelers, it startled her. When the neighbors learned of her discomfort, they tried to round up the cattle without making as much noise. One day Paula discovered visitors had set up a cheese and wine picnic on the front porch of the church. These visitors had established their picnic tradition in the years before Paula bought the place, when the church was abandoned. Paula welcomed them to continue the tradition, to be guests on her porch. All of Paula's stories take place in defined space (the pasture, the porch, her childhood home), though with less specific time (one evening, a few years ago, when I was growing up). In local history, the precise time when something happened is not as important as the location where something happened and the people who were involved. Stories are linked to places and people.<sup>20</sup> The connections between persons, places and events yield emotional dividends.

Fifteen miles to the southeast of Churchville, or 22 miles south on the highway from Paula's church, is Alpha & Omega Antiques. Located right off interstate 81 between Staunton and Lexington, this antique store sprawls out in a former lumber warehouse, adjoining a gas station convenience store and a car museum. The present building has many advantages. Near the highway, it receives a steady flow of visitors. Only 25% of the consumer base, Michael Healy guesses, is local (Staunton area), while 75% comes from travelers on the interstate. An accident on the highway always means good business at the shop. Some repeat customers travel the highway and stop by every month, looking for tools or glassware or a desired collectible. The building's large, sprawling, unorthodox floor plan provides suitable spaces for individual sellers to showcase their goods. On my thanksgiving drive to North Carolina, I pulled off the highway to buy a tank of gas, and, in the end, a box of antiques. I also met the owners, Michael Healy and Gloria Fridley. I return a few weeks later, this time with a pen, paper and a voice recorder. Eager to tell his story, I first interview Michael without Gloria.

Michael tells me that he has been 'messing' with antiques since 1984. As a contractor in Ellicott City, Maryland, he helped in a clean-up project after a fire, and the owners of the Antiques Depot there gave him, as a thank-you gift, two booths for life. At first, he was not trying to get into the antiques business. Mostly, he

was selling architectural salvage on the side. He moved to Virginia, and when he inherited more stuff from his father, he tried to sell some at an antique mall in Lexington, Virginia. There, Michael met Gloria, struck up a friendship, and encouraged her to join him not as booth sellers, but store owners. They were excited when they found their ideal building for an antique store.

Built in the 1970s, there have been four or five previous businesses in the building where Alpha & Omega opened in the fall of 2012. I asked Michael about the history of the building, and he demonstrated his knowledge of the place. Tying the building into a nationally known music band, he sought a way to find a common denominator between us.<sup>21</sup>

*MH:* It was owned by the Stadtler Brothers. Are you familiar with the Stadtler Brothers?

*MD:* No.

*[Michael begins to sing] MH:* Painting flowers on the wall, that don't bother me at all. You'll get it. Playing solitaire till dawn, with the deck of fifty one, smoking cigarettes and watching[...]

*MD:* I don't know it. It's too old. It's from the 40s?

*MH:* No, 50s, 60s. Ah, you don't know it. [he alternates between speaking and singing words] Watching Captain Kangaroo, now don't tell me I've nothing to do. Stadtler Brothers were a county music group. They backed up Elvis.

*MD:* So they owned this?

*MH:* Yeah, they had an RV business here. They serviced and sold RVs. There's a studio next door, all the stuff is pulled out of it now, but they did some recording.

*MD:* Is that general knowledge around here, do people know that?

*MH:* Nope, you wouldn't believe how many people that live in Stuart's Draft or Staunton and they've never been in the car museum here. I mean I was raised in Washington D.C., and I've been up to the monument, the Mall, Capitol, but I've never been to the White House, ever. I protested in front of the White House in the 1960s, but that's the closest I got to it.

Michael demonstrates in this passage how history serves a purpose. He seems to lament the fact that others in the area do not know about the car museum, but then, he admits that he himself has overlooked some of the national monuments in the nation's capital.

Gloria and Michael were immediately attracted to the building for its size and location. The stories attached to the place, however, they learned over time, by word of mouth. Like many visitors, we began with a discussion of the history of the building, and then moved on to related topics of local history. Although he has only lived in the area for 10 years, Michael is a wealth of local historical information. It appears to be common about store owners, that the business forces them to learn about local history. They seldom catalog this information formally, or write articles, but they know as much as anyone.

When we end the interview and shut off the voice recorder, Michael leads me downstairs to show me some antiques. A young man standing near the checkout has just agreed on a deal to sell Gloria two boxes and a glass display case of rusty metal objects. This rust is treasure found over years of metal detecting in the high farmlands between Monterey and McDowell, Virginia. The horde consists of horseshoes, slightly elongated muleshoes, cannonball fragments (there had been some

engagements there during the Civil War), rusted flatware, and all kinds of axe heads, chains and horse bits. An archaeologist would cringe, seeing all of this material dug up without documenting its provenience, but I am in no place to judge. Joining the conversation between buyer and seller, I learn something about the archaeological record of a village over the first range of the Alleghenies.

Intimidated by the grand synthetic works of professional historians, some people prefer their history to come in bits and pieces. And at the local level, history is more often recycled than recorded. Out on a Limb, Dream Haven Studios, and Alpha & Omega Antiques combine lessons on material culture, oral storytelling and community building. The stores provide a livelihood for their owners, and a hobby for many of the booth sellers or consigners. As people come and go, I listen in on stories about old people, dead people, how things used to be.

Connecting the owners to the buildings, and both of these again to materials, we build a picture of the local antiques business. Connecting these three parts to the community, in their myriad ways, we see larger patterns of historical knowledge in operation, weaving together through time the people of a particular place. Once we understand the buildings, and a bit about the owners, we can learn more about the materials inside the stores, how they are chosen and shaped by their owners, and how they connect to the community.

If we understand how antique dealers sort materials in their stores, we can better understand the nature of the material objects on display. Little has been written about the role antique stores play in sorting out the material of the past. From an economic perspective, sorting is their key function. Bleed also calls this activity 'sorting' or at times 'organizing' and agrees that sorting is the central function of antique stores: 'The antiques trade begins at the interface between things that are in use and trash. It diverts things from becoming trash either by maintaining their utility or by giving them a new function'.<sup>22</sup> Following Bleed, we might define antique stores as centers for sorting through the material culture of the past, rediscovering the value in common objects and converting them for new purposes. Old objects, once sorted, become antiques when they are recognized as representing present values that we would like to claim from the past. In *Rubbish Theory*, Michael Thompson argues that objects must be deemed worthless (rubbish) before they can be valued for an alternative purpose. Rubbish, in Thompson's view, is a transitional category between stages of value in a constant social negotiation.<sup>23</sup> While I think that Thompson's argument is more or less true, he applies it to society more generally, and he does not adequately explain the crucial role of antique stores in the process of reassigning value to objects.

The material objects that come to be sorted in an antique store represent a biased cross-section of the material culture of the past. The vast majority of material from the past has already been consumed or discarded. Only a small percent of what survives ends up on display in a museum. Antique stores deal not with rubbish or priceless works, but with the stuff in the middle: objects that are thought to be too valuable to discard entirely, but which are no longer needed by their owners. Objects that avoid the dustbin may be sorted first at an auction or estate sale. Once acquired by antique dealers, the objects are sorted again, placed into common categories, and labeled for sale. Some kinds of sorting are obvious.

Postcards, for example, are inevitably sorted by origin (and not by date or recipient, for example); books are sorted first into 'rare' and 'common' collections, and then further into genres and style; glassware, stoneware and tools are matched like to like, while broken examples may be relegated to a clearance shelf in the back of the store. But sorting also occurs in broader, subtler, actions, from the decision to buy a box at an auction house, to the decision to spend a few dollars on glue to repair a ceramic statue instead of throwing it away. The process of sorting objects is subject to every personal bias, subjective valuation, nostalgic sentiment, rational calculation and economic fallacy. We have been taught to keep books, not burn them, so the old paperbacks pile up. Grandma's sewing machine cost her a lot of money in 1931, so it must be valuable today.

Sorting actions all have the effect of deciding what objects will survive and how they might be repurposed. In some cases, dealers are the primary sorters of historical materials. At fine art antique stores, for example, sellers do most of the sorting work themselves, as they have chosen only the most valuable objects to offer for sale. But in most circumstances, the burden of sorting through the material culture of the past is on the buyer, who sifts through objects to find what is useful, visually pleasing, or a priced at a bargain. Collectors sort with purpose and hope to find exceptional objects in the common horde. Buyers and sellers work together as sorting agents. In sorting through the past, they rearrange it and seek explanation; they seek profit, personal connection and social status through objects.

In my interviews with antique store owners in the Shenandoah Valley, I listened closely for references to the ways and habit they sorted antiques. Paula Morris does more than just sort, she also adds creative touches and mixes materials to repurpose objects. Back at her brick church in the country, Paula is busy making art. When she was growing up, she hauled brick and mortar for her brick mason father.

My dad didn't want to lean over and find that there wasn't one there for him. And now that would so not be allowed. To drag a twelve year old to a construction zone, you know, and I don't remember wearing a hard hat.

Stories from her childhood demonstrate her ethic of hard work, her resilience. She cannot fix everything, she says, but 'I know what wood glue and clamps are'. For 7 years, Paula worked as an art director at the Massanutten Resort. There she learned how to mix materials for new purposes. Now, she picks and chooses what suits her. She does not shop widely, but what she acquires, she sorts through thoroughly to find ideas for repurposing. Her creations are unique. For example, she made a birdhouse from a piece of flooring left over in the renovation. She has learned to solder metal to make and repair stained glass windows. Paula acquires a modest amount, sorts thoroughly and discards little.

The larger the antique store, the more sorting there is to be done. At Alpha & Omega, Michael and Gloria supervise 20 dealers, and they police the boundaries of what is acceptable. In my second interview with Michael Healy, Gloria has joined us. It is the 23rd of December, and the Christmas traffic has brought friends and family into the store, bearing gifts for the owners. I have taken a seat on a stool near the cash register. Michael and Gloria have ordered pizza, and they sit to relax temporarily, while maintaining parallel conversations with visitors.

I am surprised to find that Gloria, who at first seemed hesitant to converse, is a kind and talented storyteller. I begin by asking the two whether they have had any trouble supervising their dealers. How have Michael and Gloria policed the quality of the store to keep out bad (unprofitable or unfriendly) dealers and undesirable objects. The transcription that follows contains the story of a booth seller who needed to be removed. I include it here to highlight the personal aspect of the sorting process, and to show how the contents of an antique store can be determined by the esthetic sense of the owners. Gloria leads in telling the story:

*Gloria:* So, we, you know, started by word of mouth telling people we had spaces for rent. And I knew him from way back. He was down at the other antique mall I worked, I worked there for ten-and-half-years, and he wasn't there two months, and I knew better, but being desperate, you know, worried about getting enough vendors in here and just opening up and I wanted the place full. Okay, maybe he's changed, so when he came in, he said, I want this space right here, the front space, and it wasn't that big, so, we ended up giving him a deal on it. Why was that?

*MH:* Because we were stupid. [Michael smiles]

*G:* Yeah, so we cut the price on it for him. Well, he started bringing his things. "Oh, I'm such a good dealer, I deal from New York to Florida." And I knew he did shows, sets up different places too. So here he starts carrying his stuff in and the first thing I see is plastic shelving. White plastic shelving. I wasn't happy about that.

*MH:* Wasn't the first thing the showcase with the big crack across the top?

*G:* Yeah, then he brings his jewelry case, and grant you, it was an old oak display cabinet, showcase. But then I looked and the crack was right across the middle in the top, and it was all scratched up, you looked down into it like this, you couldn't see the things in the case. So I suffered with that. That was right there in the middle. But then plastic shelves is what really got me because they were all around. Then he proceeded to do Christmas right here. And I looked around after he left, and here is something that's been broken, and here's the piece there, laying, he never bothered to take it out or put it in. So I go over there, he had some glassware on that plastic shelf. I'm talking about carnival glass, which I know how to price. I picked up a piece, the dust on it was that thick, and he had 280 dollars on it. And I thought, you've got to be out of your mind. There's no way.

*MH:* Ten of 'em wouldn't have been worth 280 bucks.

*G:* Forty-five dollars is max, you know, on this piece, because I knew the piece. It was just several things in there that irritated me. Well, I suffered with him. You have to see him to know, he's just like a bulldog. Every time he'd come in, I'd cringe. I didn't mind her, she was a nice lady, but she was married to him. So, I got to noticing, business was pretty crappy. People were coming in, walking in that booth, and they were leaving.

*MD:* Well, that's your showcase booth, right in the middle.

*G:* Yeah, they were walking in, they were leaving. Wait a minute. Something is wrong here. And then it dawned on me. They were walking in, seeing his prices, and I went through, everything was way overpriced. I said, they're seeing his prices, they're leaving, figuring the whole mall is like that. So I suffered with it just a little bit longer, what was it, November?

*MH:* A month and a half.

*G:* We composed a letter, together. First time I've ever written a letter to a vendor and asked him to leave. We were polite about it. We also told him, no badmouthing, or we would, you know, proceed with, you know, charges. We gave him his money back. He had paid his rent for the month, it was right in the middle of the month, I gave him his money back.

*MH:* We pro-rated the rent.

G: Yeah, I gave him money back on his rent. I just wanted him gone.

MD: Did you have to sit here and watch him huff and puff as he moved his stuff out.

G: Yes. No, I went on my way and did what I had to do. I wasn't about to help him. He brought somebody with him. But he was out in a matter of two hours. It took him, what, two weeks to move in, but two hours to move out. Immediately, business started picking up. So that was the answer. They were looking at his ridiculous prices.

Listening to Mike and Gloria together, I see how storytelling can be a team effort. Filling in the details, asking each other whether they are right or wrong, they compose the stories together. In their 'story of the bad dealer' Mike and Gloria identify the cardinal sins of the antique industry: over-priced and poor-quality items; cheap, tacky or broken display cases; bragging attitudes. Gloria's emphasis on the 'plastic shelves' demonstrates what bothers her most. The over-priced glassware was an annoyance, but coupled with the anachronistic plastic shelves, it was too much to handle. Displays must meet a standard quality and not appear too modern. In this story, Michael and Gloria also identify their own faults and their need to learn from the past. Antique malls must operate on the owner's knowledge of the dealers. Dealers who want to push new products instead of antiques are not to be welcomed into the business. Good dealers stop by frequently, tend to their booths, cooperate with the owners and meet the owners' vision of what kinds of materials should be for sale. Good dealers become part of the business and form a community of sellers. In this way, sorting historical objects is a social function. Through sorting and labeling objects, antique dealers stretch and compress historical eras, reshaping the popular perception of historical periodization.

When we study material objects in an antique store, local, regional and national patterns of production and consumption appear. One clear pattern is that antique store material culture consists disproportionately of obsolete technologies. Think, for example, of all the butter churns and molds, the washboards and the wagon wheels, besides the encyclopedia volumes, which, in a single generation have been made obsolete through technological advancements. Durability, coupled with technological change, creates a supply of certain objects that outstrips demand. For example, every antique store has its share of food processing equipment for the kitchen. Kraut stompers (wooden mallet-like objects of all sizes), apple butter stirrers, cherry depitters, coffee and nutmeg grinders and flour sifters, survive in extraordinary numbers. These have been replaced by market processes that stomp and pickle cabbage for us, that pit our cherries, grind our coffee and sift our flour. Durable items, once dear, but not with no particularly clear utility, survive the longest on the shelves.

Mentally sorting out latter-day imported goods and the surplus of certain over-represented objects, we can investigate local concentrations of antiques that indicate past industries or local behaviors. In Shenandoah Valley antique stores, for example, I see relative abundance of sheep-shearers, broad axes, corn knives and flour sacks that hint at the local past. These objects confirm that locals used to raise sheep, make log cabins, cultivate corn by hand and grind grain at company mills. Makers' marks on pottery and stoneware can be traced locally, and those who study local pottery or bricks might, through these objects, learn about local soil types or distribution

networks. Yearbooks, cookbooks and flyleaf inscriptions in mass-produced works, all provide textual evidence of the local past. Flyleaf inscriptions indicate that in the early nineteenth century, Shenandoah Valley residents carried or imported books purchased in Philadelphia. Doorframes and pillars tell us about local architectural styles in the nineteenth century. Sinks, tiles and doorknobs removed from the local four-star Stonewall Jackson Hotel in Staunton show us how luxury was defined locally in the 1920s. Recycled barn wood and tobacco stakes tell us about the choice of timber in the area. While each pattern of material culture may only provide a small clue about the local past, taken together, these pieces are likely to provide a better, more complete picture of a place than what is available in the local history section in the village library. Combined with published texts, and perhaps a study of the landscape, antiques are an excellent source for writing local history.

In the end, however, it is provenance, whether written or oral, that is crucial in reading materials to tell local history. Antique store buildings, the objects they sell, and the history of the local community are the starting points for historical conversations. Stories, like objects, come and go, are mixed and re-shaped, re-told.



FIGURE 3 Michael Healy and Gloria Fridley pose with a soldier statue near the entrance to Alpha & Omega.

Dealers, as artists, mix stories and materials to create new meanings. Just as materials without stories (or objects without provenance) are less valuable, so also history without material objects loses its immediacy and tangible connection. Stories of place and of the nature of antique objects are the gateway to deeper conversation. Stories give value to objects (Figure 3).

Objects with specific stories attached to them make good starting points for historical writing, but the discussion of specific antiques can lead to all kinds of local stories. For example, when my discussion with Michael and Gloria turned from plastic shelves to millstones, Gloria related that she used to live in a mill house where the Confederate General Robert E. Lee had carved his initials. From a description of the family's land, house and barn, she outlined her grandfather's life as a mailcarrier. In a story of her grandfather's experience as a mailcarrier, she sets a general time 'the Thirties' and a geographical parameter 'Goshen, Alan Springs, Rockbridge'. Stories that begin with objects also seek local landmarks for points of reference, geographical parameters to define what is local. Important historical figures, like Robert E. Lee, or important historical events, like battles waged in the valley, also provide points of connection between local and national history, between folk history and academic history. Interviews get at the heart of the antique dealing profession. Antique store owners must be good storytellers or they will have a difficult time staying in business. Storytelling in an antique store ties the community together and contributes to the value of the objects on display.

## Conclusions

When I finished graduate school and took my first teaching job, I began to look for antiques that I could use to illustrate my lectures on American history. In time, I learned that antiques can do more than illustrate history; they can be used to discover or even re-write history. If the goal of the historian is to present regularity and order through explanation antique stores are problematic because they reflect the chaos and disorder of the material remains of the past. Yet, this chaotic nature is precisely what we must embrace if we are to understand the past and society's engagement with it.

Museums are created out of a need to organize the past into clear categories. Museums pick and choose specific historical items, label them, organize the past and explain what is important. Museums display items from formerly powerful people or items representing groups presently recognized by political sentiment. Curators acquire objects and make them part of history by defining them, by placing them in a chronology, and by explaining their purpose. Antique stores, on the other hand, appear inherently confusing. Objects may be unlabeled and irregular, provenance is limited, function is unknown. Generally mundane and common, these objects have little probability of having played a significant role in the major events of the past. Whereas most museums showcase the particular and highlight landmark moments, antique shops house the general or common and represent the history of the everyday. In this regard, antique stores are more democratic and they more adequately reflect the complex nature of the past. Full of design failures

and unfashionable goods, antique stores preserve things with narrow use or things which have been replaced by preferred, generally more efficient technologies.

Antique stores therefore function as a genesis point for 'history from below'. They provide an unprecedented and largely neglected opportunity for a historians and folklorists. Here are mass amounts of cheap, readily available primary sources. Here is a collection of objects and associated stories. Overwhelmed by the sheer volume of objects in an antique store, we may easily turn away to find our history in paper documents and political narrative. After all, if we look at the mass of material as a whole, the antique shop is a maddening puzzle of culture. But, if we excavate and sift through materials, while recognizing the sorting process that is already underway, we can find enlightening bits of the past. Antiques can do more than serve as illustrations for known historical patterns and events; properly studied, they can provide historians with the material primary sources needed to write folk history. Patterns in the bulk of leftover materials can demonstrate the values of a community by showing what was once in use, items that have not been discarded, but that have not been elevated to museum status, either.

To incorporate the study of antiques in academic history, historians must overcome the fear of being charged with antiquarianism. Antiquarians love aged material possessions for their physical form, sentimentality or nostalgic, fashionable purposes. Historians, on the other hand, value ideas and have trouble making sense of antiques. This clutter of the past seems to the historian the exact kind of stuff that needs to be cast aside if one is to sort through the potentially relevant papers to find the particularly useful sources for writing history. When we acknowledge a relationship between the historian and the material culture of the past, we are recognizing an essential link between people and their conception of the past as a realm inhabited by the kinds of material, historical objects they encounter at places like antique stores.<sup>24</sup>

Not only is the antique store a material history library, it can also be a site of storytelling, a meeting place of a community. In some small villages, antique stores replace museums or historical societies as the formal voice of local history. Antique shops are distinct from other second hand stores in the cultural values they embody. This is not a shop of utility alone but an outgrowth of a community's interest in its heritage. Talk in an antique shop is peppered with the emotion of cultural value. Antique stores are expressions of their owners. Because there is a simultaneity of meaning in objects they can lead us in all directions.

In 1989, the folklorist Henry Glassie wrote that 'Collecting is one of the means people use to confront and overcome a world lacking in direct, intimate connections'.<sup>25</sup> Glassie is right that collecting might indicate the loss of social connections, the alienation of the marketplace, but collecting is more than a coping mechanism for modern consumer society. As a participatory activity, collecting can form bonds of community. Expressing individuality through stories, through the language on sales tags, through re-creating art, and curating booths, antique store owners and booth sellers build community. Michael Healy does not want to build a whole period-room of antiques simply to sell them, he also wants to create an environment for others to enjoy. He wants to express his interest in the past through his display.

Paula Morris has found her haven, her safe place to explore art. They all provide place for the community to consider their past and ponder their future.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Mason, WA: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985 [original 1961]), 44–5.
- <sup>2</sup> Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008).
- <sup>3</sup> Momigliano believed that the two strands of study, historical and antiquarian, were ultimately united as historians learned to read material culture. Others disagree. For example, the English historian W.G. Hoskins, writing a guide to local history in 1959, thought that while the gulf between the historian and the antiquarian had narrowed, it would never close completely. W.G. Hoskins, *Local History in England* (London: Longman, 1972–original 1959), 27.
- <sup>4</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, “Ancient History and the Antiquarian,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13, no. 3 and 4 (1950): 285–5.
- <sup>5</sup> Eric Bradley, *Antique Trader Antiques & Collectibles Price, Guide* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2014, 31st ed.); Caroline Bosly, *Rugs to Riches: An Insiders’s Guide to Buying Oriental Rugs* (New York: Pantheon Publishers, 1980); Joseph T. Butler and Ray Skibiniski, *Field Guide to American Antique Furniture* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1986).
- <sup>6</sup> Gerald Pocius, “Material Folk Culture Research in English Canada: Antiques, Aficionados, and Beyond,” *Canadian Folklore* 4, no. 1–2 (1982): 27–41; Michael Owen Jones, *Craftsman of the Cumberlands: Tradition & Creativity* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003); John Michael Vlach, *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991).
- <sup>7</sup> Kevin M. Moist and David Banash, eds., *Contemporary Collecting: Object, Practices, and the Fate of Things* (London: Scarecrow Press, 2013); Paula Rubel and Abraham Rosman, “The Collecting Passion in America,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 126 no. 2 (2001): 313–30.
- <sup>8</sup> F. J. H. Kracke, “When Antiques Comes to Judgment,” *The North American Review* 227, no. 5 (1929): 624–30 (quote 625).
- <sup>9</sup> Ann Kilborn College, *Hitting the Antiques Trail* (New York: David McKay, 1961), viii, 19.
- <sup>10</sup> The historian Victor Greene argued in 1988 that the quality of age was essentially irrelevant in the definition of antiques, that value was the primary consideration. Victor R. Greene, “E. Pinkowski, Lay Collector; A Neglected Historical Resource,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 8, no. 1 (Fall, 1988): 10–20, specifically 15.
- <sup>11</sup> See: Leon Rosenstein, “The aesthetic of the antique,” in *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, ed. Sandra H. Dudley (London: Routledge, 2012), 26–35. Reprinted from a 1987 article. Leon Rosenstein, *Antiques: The History of an Idea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008). To understand that seldom is an object completely handmade, see David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (London: The Herbert Press, 1995, original 1968), 26. For some of the ideas in this paragraph, I thank Will Getz.
- <sup>12</sup> Alois Reigl, “*The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin [1903]*” translation in *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982): 21–51.
- <sup>13</sup> Stefan Muthesius, “Why Do We Buy Old Furniture? Aspects of the Authentic Antique in Britain 1870–1910,” *Art History* 11, no. 2 (1988): 231–54.
- <sup>14</sup> Briann G. Greenfield, *Out of the Attic: Inventing Antiques in Twentieth-Century New England* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).
- <sup>15</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 145–69.
- <sup>16</sup> H. Jason Combs, “The Antiques Trade: The Diffusion of America’s Cultural Patrimony,” *Material Culture* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 42–54.

- <sup>17</sup> Peter Bleed, "Purveying the Past: Structure and Strategy in the American Antiques Trade," *Plains Anthropologist* 45, no. 172 (2000): 179–88.
- <sup>18</sup> Thomas J. Schlereth, *Artifacts and the American Past* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1980), 2, 4.
- <sup>19</sup> I first spoke to Paula on 6 December 2014 and returned for an interview on 13 December 2014.
- <sup>20</sup> Examples of this can be seen in Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), and Dennis Gaffin, *In Place: Spatial and Social Order in a Faeroe Island Community* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1995).
- <sup>21</sup> First interview with Michael was on 6 December 2014, and a follow-up interview with Michael and Gloria was on 23 December 2014.
- <sup>22</sup> Peter Bleed, "Purveying the Past: Structure and Strategy in the American Antiques Trade," *Plains Anthropologist* 45, no. 172 (2000): 181.
- <sup>23</sup> Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
- <sup>24</sup> Stephen Bann, "Clio in Part: On Antiquarianism and the Historical Fragment," *Perspecta* 23 (1987): 24–37.
- <sup>25</sup> Henry Glassie, *The Spirit of Folk Art: The Girard Collection at the Museum of International Folk Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 244.

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