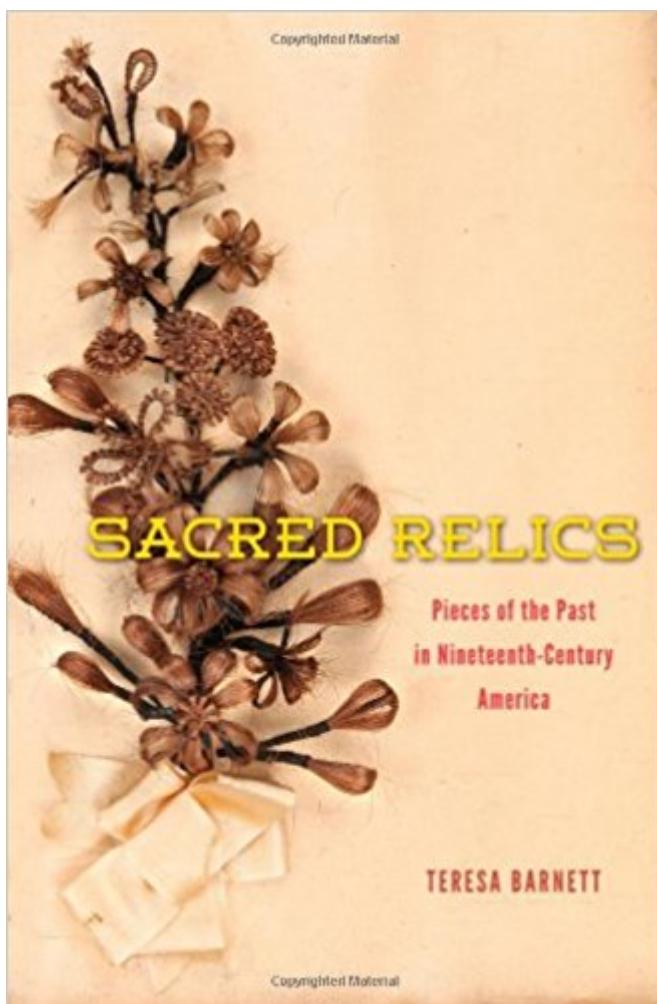


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Sacred Relics: Pieces Of The Past In Nineteenth-Century America



Synopsis

A piece of Plymouth Rock. A lock of George Washington's hair. Wood from the cabin where Abraham Lincoln was born. Various bits and pieces of the past often called "association items." These may appear to be eccentric odds and ends, but they are valued because of their connections to prominent people and events in American history. Kept in museum collections large and small across the United States, such objects are the touchstones of our popular engagement with history. In *Sacred Relics*, Teresa Barnett explores the history of private collections of items like these, illuminating how Americans view the past. She traces the relic-collecting tradition back to eighteenth-century England, then on to articles belonging to the founding fathers and through the mass collecting of artifacts that followed the Civil War. Ultimately, Barnett shows how we can trace our own historical collecting from the nineteenth century's assemblages of the material possessions of great men and women.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Teresa Barnett is interested in the survival of public things and personal and what they meant to people. Drawing selectively but constructively upon the evidence, episodes, and theories, *Sacred Relics* is a very sophisticated and polished piece of work, offering the reader a clear sense of change over time in the realm of reliquaries and their keepers. There is no single work like it in US historiography. It will be must reading in the fields of cultural, intellectual, and social history." (Michael Kammen author of *Digging Up the Dead: A History of Notable American Reburials*) "In *Sacred Relics*, Teresa Barnett explores the variety of physical ways that

Americans have created avenues to the past through history's remains. Barnett gracefully and clearly guides us through this fascinating look at material culture in America, breaking new ground she goes. This is a very fine book. (Edward Linenthal author of *Sacred Ground: Americans and their Battlefields*) "Teresa Barnett has deaccessioned a museum history of staged tableau and glass-encased artifacts, offering us instead a rich collection of relics dismissed as anachronistic refuse: shards of Plymouth Rock, George Washington's coat, Abraham Lincoln's bloodied collar; George Whitefield's corpse, Pirate Tom Trouble's arm, Jane McCrea's teeth; mourning brooches, snuff boxes, buttons, and cannonballs. She trades museal provenance—the prehistory of objects—for the lived lives of relics, affective synecdoches that connect us to the past. With beautiful detail and theoretical sophistication, Barnett makes history proximate. We become antiquarians, touching remainders and relishing their resonance." (Susan M. Stabile author of *Memory's Daughters: The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America*) "As deeply researched as it is profoundly argued, *Sacred Relics* is a window onto the now-historical practice of relic hunting that sought to preserve the past a piece at a time—in advance of the museum and a modern understanding of historic preservation. *Sacred Relics* offers a new way of seeing the otherwise nondescript shards, chips of wood, and bits of metal pried from memorable things to live forever in the act of personal possession." (William L. Bird author of *Souvenir Nation: Relics, Keepsakes, and Curios from the Smithsonian's National Museum*) "Teresa Barnett offers a carefully considered account of the creation of historical relics, objects that still occupy a special—and contested—place in the collections of museums and historic sites throughout the United States." (Katherine C. Grier author of *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930*) "Barnett's well-researched and carefully written book helps readers better understand the relic's role in understanding the past and how that understanding has changed over time. . . . This brief yet stimulating book is a must-read for scholars of historical memory." (Journal of American History) "Barnett provides readers with an illuminating study about the history of museums and, more broadly, about the history of historical thought. In addition, she offers museum professionals an enlarged interpretative framework from which to reconsider the relic. Barnett has made an impressive contribution to the history of American museums and to the study of the practice of history." (American Historical Review)

Teresa Barnett is director of the UCLA Center for Oral History Research, where she has worked for

twenty years. She has published several essays on oral history and historical memory in edited volumes. She lives in Los Angeles, California.

A brilliant work of history about the changing meanings and hold of mementoes in the daily lives of men and women in the nineteenth century. This book resonates on many levels because Barnett has thought so deeply about the issues at hand, because she has empathy for her historical actors, and because she writes so well. *Sacred Relics* is important and affecting. I will read it again.

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