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Here's the Thing: Material Culture Studies and Vast Early American History

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This article, based on the 2021 *WMQ*-EMSI workshop, “Material Culture Studies and Early American History,” offers a state-of-the-field report. It considers the scholarly popularity of the “material turn” among historians of early America in the twenty-first century and asks what scholars miss by engaging with material culture primarily as tangible evidence without dwelling on the methodological or theoretical foundations of material culture studies as a field. Understanding material culture studies as a field sheds greater light on why material culture evidence is critically important for studying early American history, especially a field that many of us now conceive of as “vast early America.” Interdisciplinary in its origins and practice, material culture studies, like early America, has a vastness—a vastness that gives us tools to decolonize our study of the past. The vastness of material culture studies equips us to do better justice to the rich history of an early America that is similarly vast. This article uses the work of workshop participants as the basis for a discussion of what material culture studies has done in the past, and can do in the future, for fully inclusive, interdisciplinary history.