Putting together a comprehensive book about the Civil War is challenging, but Neil Kagan aptly edited 49 well-written essays by Smithsonian curators into a cohesive anniversary tribute. What makes this book unique is that each curator selected an artifact that he or she felt spoke to the issues of the conflict and the space around it. Rare military items, such as magnificent presentation swords given to Generals Judson Kilpatrick and Phil Sheridan, share equal space with more utilitarian objects, like postage stamps and illustrated envelope covers. Other topics include artifacts that evoke the pain and reality of slavery and the new domain African American soldiers entered with the birth of the United States Colored Troops. More pieces chronicle the growth of technology and industry, arsenals, music, and even Native Americans issues. Page after page reveals the depth of the Smithsonian collection and the multifaceted knowledge of the curatorial staff.

As a coffee table book, reference book, or as a gift to your favorite Civil War buff, this volume is well worth having. Even the most well-versed Civil War aficionado will want to rally around it.

Michael G. Kraus is curator of collections at Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall. He co-authored The Civil War in Pennsylvania: A Photographic History, and contributed to The Civil War in Pennsylvania: The African American Experience.

Over the Alleghenies is a large book and is copiously illustrated with period artwork, technical drawings, and antique map reproductions. The format is uncluttered and the writing style flows easily. The focus of the book is from the mid-1820s (when construction of the system was begun) to 1857, when the Public Works was sold to the Pennsylvania Railroad. All 15 divisions of the system are reviewed and documented. Observations are often reinforced with quotations from the reports of the Pennsylvania Canal Commission, both from the commissioners and also technical reports submitted by the individual canal engineers. A substantial section of endnotes and a bibliography make the book a valuable reference. With Over the Alleghenies, Robert Kapsch has created a definitive textbook on the Pennsylvania Public Works that is both educational and entertaining.

Andrew Stroud is a native of Pennsylvania, attended the Montana School of Mines for Geological Engineering, and is currently working on a guidebook series for the Pennsylvania Canal.

Smithsonian Civil War: Inside the National Collection
Edited by Neil Kagan; foreword by Jon Meacham
368 pps., color photographs, index
$40.00 hardcover
Reviewed by Michael G. Kraus

One would expect a book featuring Civil War treasures from the Smithsonian Institution to be impressive given the amount of important material in the museum network’s vast holdings. Impressive is too simple a word for Smithsonian Civil War: Inside the National Collection. From the moment the large hardcover arrived for review it was clear that this book was something to savor. An astounding 550 color photographs of objects that represent the heart and soul of American Civil War history come to life in 368 pages. Setting the bar for what lies inside are two iconic artifacts featured on the covers: Confederate General John S. Mosby’s uniform on the front and General Ulysses S. Grant’s on the back.