



JOSEPH WEST PHOTO

A scene from a new exhibit at Gunn Historical Museum shows horses, an automobile and train tracks — under what appears to be an elm tree — at Washington Supply Co., circa 1910. The hardware store, at 2 Calhoun St. in Washington Depot, is a Washington institution founded in 1893 and now in its 126th year of operation.

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In 1839, abolitionist John Gunn of Washington, Conn., invited the social activist, Abby Kelley, a Quaker, to speak against slavery in his hometown.

It did not go well.

The Rev. Gordon Hayes of the Congregational Church denounced Kelley as a “Jezebel” and a “servant of Satan.” For his part in fomenting the controversy, Gunn, the elder brother of Frederick, was excommunicated from the church, for, in the words of Hayes, calling his church “a three hundred headed monster without soul or conscience — and the synagogue of Satan.”

A replica of that incendiary letter, and pictures of the two men, come midway through the Gunn Historical Museum’s exhaustive and spellbinding “Washington: An American Town.” The new exhibit, which explodes with 1,000 artifacts, five interactive iPads and three video screens, is as sophisticated and exceptional an exhibit as you will see in any local history museum in this state. In part, that stems from

A town as American as they made them

Exceptional exhibition at Gunn Museum examines Washington through its artifacts



The Rev. Gordon Hayes, pastor of the Congregational Church in Washington, Conn., in 1839 excommunicated John Gunn for allegedly calling the church ‘the synagogue of Satan.’

GUNN: Extraordinary town

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the vision of its creator, curator Stephen Bartkus, and its designers, Julia Nable and Zoltan Csillag of SandorMax. But mostly it stems from the labor and generosity of Washington residents who contributed artifacts, time and ideas to an extraordinary exhibit in which the town casts itself as an ordinary American town whose fledgling growth mirrored the country's own. That meant battles, often vituperative, over abolition, death and loss in a series of wars, agrarian wealth and industrial innovation and a struggle to carve out its own identity.

THE EXHIBIT, MADE POSSIBLE by a \$100,000 Good to Great grant from the state, succeeds largely because of the depth of its collection — 1,000 artifacts culled from 15,000 pieces — that tell stories that are astonishingly vivid and achingly intimate. This is not history from a distance but close enough to mourn.

Take this story from the life of Civil War veteran Abner Mitchell, who was drafted in 1863 when he was 42, only months after President Abraham Lincoln had instituted the country's first draft. It was a call that capped many tragedies to befall Mitchell and his family.

In 1860, Mitchell and his wife lost one of their five children, Willie, in a sledding accident. Distraught, Mitchell's wife, Lydia, died shortly thereafter. In December 1862, three of Mitchell's remaining four children developed diphtheria. Fanny, 15; Charlie, 11; and Matthew, 3, died within three days of one another. All three were buried together in the Washington cemetery the day after Christmas.

When Mitchell was summoned to the battlefield, the town, recognizing his advanced age and recent tragedies, offered to send a substitute instead. Abner Mitchell refused. He joined the 6th Infantry Regiment Connecticut Volunteers in August 1863. A photograph of Mitchell, and his remaining child, Mary, surround a reproduction of a letter Mitchell sent her from the battlefield.

On Aug. 18, 1864, Abner Mitchell was shot by a sharpshooter in Deer Bottom, Va., and died two days later, leaving Mary an orphan. In less than a year, she had lost her entire family.

These kinds of stories, replicated and folded into the larger narrative of the town, make the exhibit so engrossing that it rewards more than a single viewing. The digital component, which allows visitors to take a "deeper dive" into the town's people, objects and history through a series of iPads, will swell as more artifacts are added.

AMONG THE MANY UNUSUAL FEATURES of Washington's legacy is its long history of human habitation. Archeol-



Washington's contributions to the arts are highlighted in a new, long-term history exhibit at Gunn Historical Museum in Washington.

IMAGES COURTESY OF GUNN HISTORICAL MUSEUM

ogists have found the earliest evidence of habitation in the area dates back 10,300 years. That makes Washington one of the earliest Native American sites discovered in New England. Yet, the 38-square-mile town, which began in 1673 as Pomperaug Plantation, is not so much exceptional, in the curator's mind, as typical. Its founders bartered, bickered, prospered, innovated, failed, fought and suffered in a line roughly parallel to that of the country.

"There are these great American stories that connect to a larger theme," the curator, Bartkus, said.

That's a generous assertion. Washington may have started in typical fashion, but it hasn't ended that way. At one point, Washington boasted so many mills, factories, dairy farms and manufacturers that local historian William Bader boasted, "Once, almost anything a life needed was made in Washington." Yet, nearly four centuries after its founding, Washington remains a startlingly small, picturesque town of 3,500 with a smaller-than-average business footprint and higher-than-average cultural output. It is home to two dance companies, five private schools, a prominent art association, a 1,000-acre land trust and one of the state's last independent bookstores.

HOW DID THE TOWN PULL THIS OFF? That's not a question this exhibit necessarily answers, and that's probably for the best. Instead, the exhibit reminds viewers of how ordinary the town was, struggling to succeed as the country did the same.

Nevertheless, Washington benefited from early and unusual strokes of good fortune. In 1673, settlers made the first of nine purchases from natives that would form the Pomperaug Plantation. The man facilitating those purchases was the Yale-educated Capt. John Minor — who just happened to speak Eastern Algonquin. It's also difficult to escape the contribution of the Gunn brothers — John and Frederick — who must have seemed like wild-eyed extremists when they began lecturing the town

about abolition and moral education. But they clearly developed a culturally minded, outdoorsy spirit that has remained with the town.

OPENING WITH ONE OF THREE INFORMATIONAL VIDEOS, the exhibit early on includes a vibrant artistic rendering of Chief Waramaug, the powerful native sachem from whom much of the land that is now Washington was purchased. Among the last families to purchase land from Chief Waramaug's heirs were the Averill family, which settled in Washington in 1746 and are still on the same land, doing the same thing: farming.

In fact, three families in Washington remain on the same land in the same houses they've called home since the 18th century. In addition to the Averills, who now run a popular fruit orchard, the Logan family (1738) and the Cogswells (1745) have remained in town and have furnished curators with some of their choice heritage items, from family photographs to spinning wheels, foot warmers, tin candle molds, tavern signs and even rare epaulettes from the Marquis de Lafayette.

Slaves were a part of Washington history, at least since the beginning of the 18th century, and several Washington ministers produced texts defending the practice. In the case of the Rev. N.S. Wheaton, justified it on biblical grounds. The exhibit includes his pamphlet, "Discourse on St Paul's Epistle to Philemon; Exhibiting the Duty of Citizens of the Northern States in Regard to the Institution of Slavery," delivered in 1850.

"I am an abolitionist among a slave-holding community," said Frederick Gunn, who established his school, The Gunnery, in the same year. Its focus — on the importance of building character, the need to abolish slavery and reverence for nature — was not universally shared, Bartkus said. "Abolitionists were in the minority here," he said. "They were considered heretics and radicals. The ministers here were preaching a biblical

justification for slavery."

The last census that lists slaves in Washington was in 1810 when six labored there. Curators have traced 20 slaves who toiled in Washington, but say there were likely more. The exhibit includes the bill of sale for a 24-year-old "male Negro" named Sefer, who was purchased for 80 pounds in 1773. Among the slaves were Jeff Liberty, owned by John Farrand. When Farrand enlisted in the Revolutionary War, so did Jeff Liberty — in exchange for his eventual liberty, which Farrand granted at the end of the war.

THOUGH IT BEGAN AS A FARMING TOWN, Washington's nearby Shepaug and Housatonic rivers encouraged the proliferation of mills. Though renowned for its fine Holsteins, Washington produced everything from corn to twine, axe handles, batting, cigars, marble and hat boxes. As the exhibit reads, "Once peaceful and bucolic, 'The Flats,' (Washington Depot) became smoke-filled and bustling. In 'Factory Hollow,' noise, ambition and industry reign."

The arrival of the Shepaug Railroad in 1872 not only facilitated the movement of goods, but began the town's entry into the tourist trade, a "get-away" from the noxious city. The arrival of the Mayflower Inn in 1920 only cemented that reputation. Photographs of baseball games, tennis and croquet matches and waterskiing on Lake Waramaug add to the image of a healthy, hard-working arcadia nourished by fresh milk from the town's farms and fruits plucked from its orchards. Precisely how it avoided the big-boxification of the rest of the country remains an enigma.

Certainly, Washington's is not the story of every town in America. But "Washington: An American Story" makes visitors wish it were.

Gunn Historical Museum is at 5 Wykeham Road, Washington, Conn., at Route 47 and Wykeham Road. For information go to gunnmuseum.org or call 860-868-7756.

Image shows part of a two-page spread in 'Connecticut Life' magazine from July 2, 1964, titled 'When 2,764 Were Slaves.' It had a short story about slavery in Connecticut and a map showing the number of slaves in each town or region, based on the 1790 census. Beneath the story was a list of the leading slaveholders in the state. Elijah Mason Sr. of Lebanon was the top slaveholder, with 28. Rulef Dutcher of Litchfield made the list with 7.

