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.

BY TRACY O’SBAUGHNESSY  
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

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 communicated 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 the fact that the museum is a direct descendant of a local antebellum hotel and meeting house.

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.”

In today’s edition of The Sunday Republican is a 24-page special section, Autumn Lifestyles Almanac, with stories about the coming season and the activities that give fall its unique signature.

The cover story deals with the history and traditions of Octoberfest, particularly its association with beer. With the proliferation of craft breweries in Greater Waterbury and Litchfield County, there are plenty of places to quaff a toast in the true spirit of Oktoberfest.

And speaking of beer, don’t forget the wine, with a story about fall activities at one area winery in New Hartford. Food is another hallmark of fall, from pumpkins to peaches, plums to pears, from tarts to tailgating, and apple pies to apple fritters. The tailgating story includes a handy checklist on things to pack when heading off to party before the game.

Activities abound in the fall, from zip lining above the trees at one of the state’s casinos, to taking in the fall foliage to getting ready for Halloween.

There’s also a story that looks at some of the remaining country fairs in our area, ending with the Riverfront Fair, which is celebrating its 110th anniversary this year. Along with the change of colors comes the threat of hurricanes and other weather events, including snow, so there’s a story that highlights some of the things you can expect from fall weather.

And in the back of the section is a handy series of calendars highlighting some of the coming events this fall.

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The vision of its creator, curator Stephen Barkus, and its designer, Judi Naylor and Zoltan Colladar of SandlerMax. But mostly it stems from the labor and generosity of Washington residents who contributed artifacts, tales and ideas to an extraordinary exhibit in which the town itself became an ancient 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 carry out its own identity.

The exhibit, made possible by a $10,000 grant from the state, succeeds largely because of the dedicated workers, who—1,000 artifacts culled from 15,000 contributed by more than 200 people—told stories that are astonishingly vivid and achingly intimate. This is not history from a distance but close encounters with the past. Take this story from the life of Civil War veteran Abner Fox, who was born in 1815, grew up in 1832, and was killed in 1862 after months of fighting at Gettysburg. Fox, a blacksmith, owned a farm near the town, and his family’s farm is now a park. The exhibit tells the story of Fox’s life and death, as told by his son.

The story opens in 1848, when a young blacksmith named Abner Fox moved to Washington with his family. They lived in a small house on the outskirts of town, where they farmed and raised a family. Abner was a skilled worker who made and sold all kinds of iron objects, including plows, harrows, and other farming equipment. He also made tools for local craftsmen, such as blacksmiths and carpenters. Abner was known for his honesty and integrity, and he was respected by his colleagues and neighbors.

In 1850, Abner Fox was called to serve in the Mexican-American War, where he fought bravely and was wounded. When he returned home, he found that his farm had been stolen by a group of slave traders. Abner was determined to fight back and reclaim his property. He organized a group of local farmers and armed them with guns and powder. They ambushed the slave traders and drove them away, saving Abner’s farm and freeing many of the slaves who were being transported to the South.

Abner Fox continued to work on his farm, and he became involved in the local abolitionist movement. He helped to organize a group of local farmers and laborers who worked to free the remaining slaves in the area. He also helped to establish a school for black children, which was funded by local abolitionists.

Abner Fox was a true hero of the abolitionist movement, and his story is told in the exhibit. His story is just one of many that are told in the exhibit, which features artifacts, photographs, and stories that bring the past to life. The exhibit is a powerful reminder of the struggles that people faced in the past, and it is a call to action for us all to work towards a better future.