at Work” and “Dangerous or Unhealthy Work.” With the current exhibit, the latter two gave way to the less controversial “Who Works” and “Why We Work” sections.

In one of those events that couldn’t be scripted, this reviewer met a “Rosie the Riveter” at the exhibit, Edie Fishman of New Haven. During World War II, she worked for 2 ½ years as a machinist’s assistant at the New York Shipbuilding Corp’s Camden, N.J. shipyard, which employed some 35,000 people.

Giving strength to the exhibit was the collaboration of Connecticut Humanities and the New Haven Public Library on a series of events related to the show. Some twenty events, including book discussions, talks, and photo and film discussions, were held in conjunction with the exhibit. These events, which treated various subjects in greater depth, added more color to the exhibit that introduced the subject of American Workplace History.

“Connecticut at Work” travels across the state through December 2014. The program features the Smithsonian Institution’s “The Way We Worked” exhibition with stops in seven communities: New Haven, Torrington, Hartford, Waterbury, Coventry, Stamford, and Groton. Surrounding communities are adding local focus with community history exhibits, book and film discussions, author talks, performances and more. “Connecticut at Work” is an initiative of Connecticut Humanities, a non-profit affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Connecticut tour of “The Way We Worked” is made possible by Connecticut Humanities and Historic New England. For a calendar of events and more information, visit <cthumanities.org/ctatwork>.

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Always a Pleasure to Hear from Home is a new exhibition on view through 2014. Lebanon Historical Society, 856 Trumbull Highway, Lebanon, Connecticut, 06249. (860) 642-6579. Hours are: Wednesday through Saturday, 12 p.m. – 4 p.m. Admission to the museum is free. <www.historyofLebanon.org>

As the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War continues, many organizations are mounting exhibits in connection with this historic anniversary. The Lebanon Historical Society’s new exhibit, “Always A Pleasure To Hear From Home,” dives
into the mid-19th century. This new show does a tremendous job with connecting all aspects of Lebanon’s past with this major event in American history.

The exhibition is on view in LHS’s rear gallery space in their up-to-date Visitor Center. When entering the show, the visitor is surrounded by colors, images, historical objects, and hands-on materials. As one enters, a welcoming table offers visitors the chance to handle and read reproduced letters Lebanon residents exchanged with soldiers on the front lines. Using period letters from their archives as a guide, the exhibition team has cleverly handwritten selected letters onto fine stationary to simulate the effect of reading correspondence from the period. By handling these replicas which possess the look and feel of historical documents, the visitor can increasingly connect with the past while appreciating the time the exhibition team took with this process. By having a number of different letters to choose from, the activity allows multiple visitors to participate at the same time. Next to the letter station, in the center of the gallery, reproduction 19th-century upholstered chairs offer a comfortable reading area for visitors to immerse themselves in the readily available documents, which also include reproduction newspapers. Overall, this recreated domestic setting allows visitors to share in the experience of Lebanon’s home front.

The opening text panels entitled “Lincoln,” “Governor Buckingham,” and “Abolition” provide a national perspective in which set the context of Lebanon’s local history. “Lincoln” begins with a synopsis of President Abraham Lincoln’s 1860 election and the beginning of the war, which provides visitors with a general understanding of the conflicts leading up to the war. While the text panel contains great background information and shows a variety of historic images, portions of it are difficult to read owing to the overlap of text and images. For example, the background image of the Wauregan Hotel in Norwich, where a campaigning Lincoln stayed, obscures the clarity of the text in one section, which is unfortunate. Despite that one issue, the panel does a wonderful job incorporating local commemorations of Lincoln’s first Inauguration with national images of the same event.

A national perspective is vital to understanding the overall impact of the war but this exhibit is about local efforts, and that begins with Governor William Buckingham, who grew up on his father’s farm in Lebanon. The text addresses his early years in town, providing a good lead into Buckingham’s heavy political involvement in the war during his terms as governor, 1856-1866, especially how the state dealt with the beginning of the war. The next panel, “Abolition,” connects the national movement
to abolish slavery with efforts of local residents, like Abigail Kelly and thirteen other Lebanon residents who signed an anti-slavery petition. Connecticut had a number of ties to the abolition movement and the panel helps set the stage for visitors on its importance. These three introductory panels allow visitors to get an overall sense of the Civil War on a national level but also how the town of Lebanon fits into it.

The “Town Affairs” section gives visitors a visual of what Lebanon’s town make-up was like during the mid-19th century through census records and maps. This panel demonstrates an emigration trend that occurred in Lebanon between the American Revolution and the Civil War due to residents moving to the growing cities for economic advancement. Lebanon’s population in 1860 was half of what it was in 1775 and census records are used to demonstrate this trend.

The primary theme of the exhibition is to demonstrate that Lebanon’s citizens did whatever was needed in order to aid the Union’s cause. A major component of this concept is expressed in “Agriculture.” This section features one of the most striking installations of the show, making connections between selected pieces of farming equipment and various major changes in the town during the war. Before the Civil War, many farmers in Lebanon did not own heavy farming equipment because the cost was too great, but the war changed that. As many men left to fight, more and more farms turned to purchasing heavy equipment to help with the decreased manpower, as seen in the large hand tiller on view. By incorporating physical objects with multiple period photographs, primarily as background images, visitors learn about agriculture in a number of ways.

Fig. 2. Changes in agricultural methods and light industry impacted Lebanon’s wartime economy. Courtesy of Lebanon Historical Society.

Manufacturing also shaped the wartime economy of Lebanon, as seen in the “Industry” panel. Heavy manufacturing proved invaluable to the Union cause, and though Lebanon was primarily an agricultural town, it contained selected small industries. By 1850, one of the paper mills in town was bought by Hayward Rubber and began producing ladies’ waterproof shoes. Once the war broke out, Hayward Rubber moved to making the rubber coated blankets, knapsacks, and rubber pontoon bridges needed to outfit the troops. The section features a knapsack made by Hayward Rubber, accompanied by historic images of its factory and what the pontoon bridges looked like.

The home front effort, led by Lebanon’s women, comprises a large portion of the show in several related sections. The support that soldiers received consisted of letters of encouragement but also physical materials from home. The Lebanon home
front support is expressed brilliantly through hands-on materials, photographs, reproductions, and historic objects. On display is a pieced-block quilt that contains signatures of the women who participated in creating it. In the same case there is a minute book of the Exeter Female Benevolent Society, one of the women’s aid groups in Lebanon. One of the most striking aspects in the exhibit space is the enlarged drawing of a ladies aid organization in the corner of the exhibit. The image takes up half of the wall, visually connecting the historic objects and reproductions.

This section transitions easily into one addressing “Transportation,” one of the most eye-catching portions of the show. The exhibit features a simulated shipping barge that includes shipping crates, chains, a hand-painted scene of a river with a riverboat, and other items that would have been shipped to soldiers. The illusion of a shipping barge is constructed with creatively disguised museum materials. The base of the barge is a basic platform that is painted to resemble aged wooden posts. A shipment is ready and waiting on the dock to be sent to the troops. On the barge, barrels, crates of packaged goods, jugs, and baskets of fresh fruits provide a visual interpretation of what was sent to the front lines. “Transportation” leads directly into information panels on the men who fought for the Union and how enlistment impacted those at home.

In the center of the room stands a mannequin wearing a woman’s workday dress of the mid-19th century. The costumed figure stands in a simulated domestic “kitchen” scene, surrounded by objects and images that evoke supporting troops from the home front. Behind the figure stand a stove, a cabinet filled with period glassware, jars and jugs and a basket filled with fruit, as this installation suggests this woman will be sending her care package of welcome provisions to a soldier in camp. This replicated kitchen area is directly next to the domestic setting featuring the chairs, table and reproduction letters so that the two scenes evoke the feeling that the visitor has stepped into someone’s home.

The focus of this exhibit is on the town of Lebanon’s war effort but unless you understand what soldiers were dealing with on the battlefront, a visitor cannot put all the home front relief in context. It is one thing to learn that 197 Lebanon men fought in the Civil War, but the show makes a dramatic point by listing all their names. The entire right gallery wall is dedicated to those men who fought and what happened to them. The section highlights local residents, which includes “Men of Color” and two white soldiers, William Wetmore and William Huntington. Five men who joined the
Connecticut Colored Regiments listed their hometown as Lebanon, all of them with the 29th Colored Regiment.

“Men of Color” is followed by individual stories of men who fought and died during the Civil War. The section follows two young men, William Wetmore and William Huntington, as they go off to war. Their personal writings, which consisted of letters and journals, demonstrate different wartime experiences. Both men write about the large blows their regiments take in battle and the often severe wartime living conditions. Huntington is wounded and writes of the devastation of his regiment at the Battle of Antietam, which was one of the bloodiest days for Connecticut troops. Wetmore’s writing discusses camp life and what it was like during battle. By understanding the stories of these men, which includes their photographs, visitors connect to the soldiers as individuals on a very personal level. The objects in this section allow the visitor to see into camp life and personal attire of Union soldiers, including a full uniform, canteens, silverware used by soldiers, a pocketknife, a writing kit, and weaponry. By connecting these men’s stories with their personal effects, a visitor can connect to the personal side of the war.

Not all of the men from Lebanon were lucky enough to come home from the war, and the exhibit honors the war’s casualties. All twenty-six Lebanon men who died during the war are honored and are individually mentioned in the exhibit through a panel that gives a small biography of the fallen soldiers. This gives every casualty a chance to be represented in a personal way, instead of just a name on a list. The conclusion of the exhibit connects Lebanon’s war casualties with that of President Lincoln, effectively bringing the show and the war to a close.

As the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War continues, people want to know about the individuals that sacrificed everything. We want to know about what it was like from those who fought but also how it affected those at home. The Lebanon Historical Society does a fabulous job capturing many aspects of the Civil War. We always hear about the national implications but the local issues are just as important.

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