In the last issue of The Observer, I argued that the American Originals: Treasures from the National Archives exhibit, now on display at the Museum of American Political Life, helps us understand who we have been as a people and a nation, what we’ve struggled over, and how those struggles have shaped us.

But as this presidential primary season reminds us, most Americans live and vote and pay taxes in states—some of which are really old, some pretty young; some tiny, some immense; some predictable, some downright peculiar. In fact, one of the most distinctive aspects of our history has been the ongoing battle over whether we would be a single nation or a collection of states. While the Civil War settled the issue in one sense—before the war people said, “The United States are…”; afterwards they said, “The United States is…”—the pendulum of power has continued to swing back and forth. In the 1950s, for instance, the Southern cry of “states’ rights” echoed that of 100 years before. The civil rights movement of that era, sometimes known as a Second Reconstruction, relied on federal law, and sometimes U.S. soldiers, to protect African-American rights, just as they had during the first Reconstruction after the Civil War. And nowadays, the Supreme Court is again seeking to expand the rights of states against those of the federal government.

Because Connecticut has such a rich and ancient history, long pre-dating European settlements, and including colonies that preceded the United States itself by more than a century, we can see a good bit of the American past through a state lens. That’s why the University has mounted an entire companion exhibit, Connecticut Originals, drawn from our own Museum of American Political Life collection as well as from those of more than 20 museums and individuals around the state.

These extraordinary artifacts—documents, wristwatches, photographs, costumes, posters, political memorabilia, television footage, books, sports equipment, PEZ dispensers—help chart the history of a state frequently at the center of American politics, culture, and industry. So much of Connecticut’s past has revolved around manufacturing that the exhibit includes a virtual kaleidoscope of inventions, from a typewriter to a bombsight, from Silly Putty to Wiffle balls.

The sheer practical genius of Connecticut inventors and manufacturers, who seemed able to make almost anything, inspired Hartford resident Mark Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court. A rollicking celebration of New England inventiveness, the novel turns dark and deadly as protagonist Henry Morgan uses his knowledge of modern warfare to slaughter 25,000 opponents in a matter of minutes.

As Connecticut Originals shows, war is often the godfather of technological change, from Eli Whitney’s first efforts at interchangeable musket parts to Simeon North’s fully interchangeable model 1816 pistol to the invention of the Timex watch to the Norden bombsight, an analog computer used to improve the bombardier’s accuracy during World War II.

But this story also inspired Connecticut artist Michael Borders to create his life’s work. Borders has been working for 25 years on his enormous eight-panel (one for each county)
painting Connecticut Industry. Never before exhibited all at once, this extraordinary creation—40 feet long and 12 feet high—shows the people who made Connecticut history. The foreground, which is populated with early Native Americans through present-day residents, shades upward into huge drawings of machinery and inventions, and then still further into the distinctive topography of each county. Borders understands that the history and character of a people are intertwined with the natural and the built environment. He has painted a vivid, striking, mural-like work that manages to grasp centuries of human endeavor in a very particular place.

Since 1639, when Windsor, Hartford, and Wethersfield adopted a constitution they called the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, residents of this state have been exploring, often expanding what it means to be a self-governing people. In American Originals, we can see the riveting story of the captives from the slave ship Amistad, held in a Connecticut prison while the U.S. Supreme Court was deciding their fate.

In Connecticut Originals, we get to see how some extraordinary women pushed against the boundaries of “acceptable” behavior, sometimes winning, sometimes losing, but always displaying the kind of courage too rarely acknowledged in our textbooks. The earliest residents of this territory are represented by Fielding family women working to preserve the Mohegan Pequot language and culture; a more recent example is alumna Edna Negrón Rosario ’73, ’74, University of Hartford regent and leader in Hartford’s growing Puerto Rican community.

But also consider schoolmistress Prudence Crandall, who braved harassment, jail, and financial failure when she tried to educate free black women in 1833–34. Even though a mob destroyed Crandall’s academy, Connecticut overturned its own “Black Law” a few years later, gave her a pension four years before she died, and according to the exhibit team, “named her the state female hero in 1995.”

Or Ella Grasso, who was not only Connecticut’s first female governor but also the first female governor in U.S. history to get the job without having been preceded by her husband. Never beaten at the polls, she opened up politics for a generation.

Or the remarkable mother-daughter pair of Katharine Houghton Hepburns. The mother (1878–1951) helped lead the successful fight for women’s right to vote, but she really came to prominence as a national advocate for birth control. She did so at a time when Connecticut prohibited distribution of basic information about contraception and a woman who spoke out on the issue risked ridicule and jail.

The daughter—well, the daughter. What can you say about

Katharine Houghton Hepburn the younger? Mention Adam’s Rib, The African Queen, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, and The Lion in Winter; her four Oscars; that inimitable tough-gal upper-class Yankee style. Don’t forget those cheekbones to die for and that she was a woman who wore pants when few others did. Could there be a more original Connecticut heroine?

One last example. Those of us who take ESPN for granted probably don’t know that the Connecticut-based network, 25 years old this year, braved ridicule and the conventional wisdom (sound familiar?) to bet that Americans would watch televised sports 24 hours a day. Today, 73 million homes have access to ESPN.

There’s more of course, but you need to see the exhibit to appreciate it all. And that’s the story of Connecticut Originals, over and over. Ideas and principles in the hands and heads of extraordinary men and women have made Connecticut, and the world, a different place. ■

The Connecticut Originals exhibition was curated by Marianne Curling with the advice of Edmund Sullivan, professor emeritus at the University and founder of the Museum of American Political Life; Leslie Lindenauer, assistant professor of history at the University and executive director of the Connecticut Women’s Hall of Fame; and Dean Nelson, museum administrator at the Museum of Connecticut History at the Connecticut State Library. Design and installation is by Harrison Jenkins Design of Bloomfield, Conn., and educational programs were prepared by Sally Whipple, education consultant.

Warren Goldstein is chair of the Department of History in the University’s College of Arts and Sciences. His biography of William Sloane Coffin, Jr., former Yale University chaplain and civil rights and anti–Vietnam War peace activist, will be published by Yale University Press in March.