

Vermonters Discover Their Roots

Did relatives walk with Champlain?

By EDDY MULHERN for The Essex Reporter

In Vermont, Quebec license plates are familiar, but how many of us stop to wonder about the phrase, "Je me souviens." It literally translates to "I remember," but its meaning is up for interpretation. To John Fisher, the phrase means I remember the Franco experience, the loss of Quebec to the English, and the "sad parts of French Canadian history."

As a genealogist, Fisher finds the plate particularly pertinent because he remembers French Canada as it is linked to his family history. This connection is the part of genealogy that he finds the most compelling. Fisher is the secretary of the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogy Society. He helped start the society in 1996 with John Moreau and Paul Landry.

The society has since then collected thousands of resources from multiple government and church sources in its library at Fort Ethan Allen. French Canadian records are some of the most meticulous in the world. According to Fisher this is because the King of France declared that there was to be a record for every Catholic marriage. The tradition has been maintained far beyond the Colonial period. Most of the records at the library were collected from the Catholic Church. The society's largest project is the collection of sacramental records from every Catholic parish in Vermont. This is referred to as the Diocese project and is still incomplete. The finished records have been published and genealogical libraries around the world have purchased the books.

Genealogists often feel a particular connection to one ancestor. The one who is either famous or participated in a momentous event. This year, with the Quadricentennial of Samuel de Champlain's arrival on Lake Champlain coming up in 2009, the society raised a new challenge: to find an ancestor who knew explorer Samuel de Champlain. Some of the members of the society have already found an ancestor's name on the list. These members proudly wear buttons that say "My Ancestor Walked with Champlain."

Though Valerie George, of Milton, could not prove that her ancestors knew Champlain, she feels connected to less prestigious ancestors. George can trace her lineage to a girl who became one of the 700 "Filles du Roi," or "Daughters of the King." These young women were respectably sent to New France by the king to marry soldiers and thereby convince them to stay behind and defend New France. She feels a particular connection with her ancestor James George. She tells of his rise from slums of London to property ownership in The Massachusetts Bay colony. Lineage is something that, George thinks, can make one feel elitist at first. However she thinks that even some of the most historically renowned ancestors were "just trying to get by." She says that knowledge of her ancestry helps her "feel rooted" and "gives her a sense of place in the world."

Fisher thinks that many Vermonters have a lot to learn about their lineage. He said that many of

Family Ties

The Vermont French Canadian Genealogical Society library is located at the Dupont Building, 29 Ethan Allen Avenue, Fort Ethan Allen Complex, Colchester. It is open Tuesday Nights from 7 pm to 9:30 pm in summer. Go to www.vt-fcgs.org for more information.

those who have lived here for more than a few generations are probably Canadian. Many still do not know, however.

Many people come about genealogy to discover greater truths about themselves. Fenton LeVanway of Westford said that his father died in 2005 and after that he "became interested in who he was." He learned much about his lineage in his three years of research, including a harrowing tale of his great-great-great-great grandfather. This ancestor was captured with the Ethan Allen Boys in the Revolutionary War. He escaped the wrath of the English authorities and fled to New York where he was finally granted property as a veteran.

Society librarian Janet Landry said "many people start [researching] after their parents are gone." However, she thinks that the experience can be much richer if done at a young age.

The society's library is open for research this summer on Tuesday nights from 7 pm to 9:30 pm. More information is available on the web at vt-fcgs.org.