

Group explores Vermont's French-Canadian ancestry

December 2, 2009 Lynn Monty, Burlington Free Press

Sheila Morris of Williston became president of the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society three years ago after getting “hooked” on not only researching her own French-Canadian heritage but also helping the other 300 or so members of the society do the same. She and about 20 volunteers transcribe records from Vermont parishes and have millions of records on file from Quebec, Canada. We spoke with her at their base inside Fort Ethan Allen in Colchester on Nov. 25.

What is the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society?

The society was founded in 1996 and is dedicated to the research of French-Canadian ancestry. Basically, we do a lot of research to help people find out about their French-Canadian heritage. Most of us here are very familiar with the name changes, reference resources, and migration patterns of these ancestors and we have millions of French-Canadian and Franco-American records here now. The society literally started in a closet at St. Joseph’s parish in Burlington . It’s the oldest Catholic church in Vermont dating back to 1834, and we transcribe all of the records from the priests’ handwritings at that parish and now all Vermont parishes.

Ralph Mitchell of S. Burlington researches his ancestry at VT-FCGS at Fort Ethan Allen in Colchester



What are some of the most interesting things you have found?

The Filles du Roi, or King’s Daughters. About 700 women arrived in the colony of New France (Canada) around 1670 under King Louis XIV of France. They were part of a program to promote the settlement of the colony. Most of the people of French-Canadian descent today, both in Canada and the U.S., are descendants of these women. Most were single French women, and many were orphans. We also

found that many French-Canadians were sterilized here in Vermont along with the Abnakis as part of a Eugenics movement during the first half of the 20th century. I found my ancestor, Marin Boucher, who was the first person listed in the will of Samuel de Champlain. Boucher was a mason, and Champlain left him a suit of clothes.

Why are you so passionate about this?

I would have to say the biggest reason we do this is because we want people with French-Canadian ancestry to be proud because it hasn’t always been that way. It’s a new thing.