



Winooski cheers French culture

JOEL BANNER BAIRD, Free Press Staff Writer 7:13 a.m. EDT July 12, 2015

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WINOOSKI – From poutine and fresh curds to step-danced reels, from croissants to African fabrics — all things French circulated with flair Saturday at French Heritage Day in Winooski.

Visible from the Onion City's fabled roundabout in his plumed tricor hat, sword and leather vest,

Jon Normandin, 68, hailed passersby.

With little encouragement, Normandin outlined his family's history north of the current international border and then back to Europe.

In Québec he has prowled sub-basements and land records for clues. He says has found traces of Barbary pirates in his bloodlines.



Jon Normandin, 68, of Burlington, greets a visitor Saturday to French Heritage Day in Winooski. (Photo: JOEL BANNER BAIRD/FREE PRESS)

A small sailing vessel lay beached nearby, beached on a bit of sidewalk on Winooski Falls Way, its sail a billowing billboard, its rigging a riot of international flags.

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Further along, Robert Benoît of Elmore eyed the middle distance.

"I'm looking for a road that isn't here anymore," he said.

Benoît's family lived in these parts after moving south to work in the nearby mills, he said. Where exactly? Benoît said he would schedule a visit to city hall and check the old maps.



Louisa Duncan, 2, of Winooski, examines a small sailboat Saturday at the entrance to French Heritage Day festivities. (Photo: JOEL BANNER BAIRD/FREE PRESS)

Maps of several kinds lay on tent-sheltered tables. Some were facsimiles of those that Samuel de Champlain had so expertly drawn.

Others maps showed the movement of generations: family trees called "fan-charts," drawn in what looked like ripples of a pond-dropped pebble.

"That was the old-fashioned way, the hard way," said John Fisher, a charter member of the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society.

The society now boasts about 450 paying members, he added.

Not only do members benefit from subscriber databases, but they rub shoulders in unexpected ways at the Fort Ethan Allen library.

"They find connections just by being in there," Fisher said. "They'll compare notes about someone and then you'll here, 'Oh — I'm related to them!'"



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Jon Fisher of Burlington discusses his genealogical work Saturday at French Heritage Day in Winooski. (Photo: JOEL BANNER BAIRD/FREE PRESS)

The library has broadened its scope to accommodate the genealogical needs of folks with roots in Germany, Scotland, Holland and England.

"Nobody's 100-percent French," Fisher said.

Consulting with Fisher on Saturday were Carol and Giles Boissonneault of St. Albans, who planned to trace their family's history with greater specificity back to France.

Generations of his relatives in Quebec still farm on Orleans Island, upstream from Quebec City, and Giles and Carol visit fairly frequently.

"French was my first language," he said. "I never spoke English to my dad."

Many others at the Winooski festival spoke little or no French, citing their parents' and grandparents' eagerness to assimilate into an English-speaking culture.

Tending a booth Souleymane Solo Sana, an Essex Junction-based dancer, choreographer and teacher, said his French was still quite good — the language is alive and well in his native Mali.



Kyendamina Cleophace Mukeba, left, jokes with Laurie Crosby at French Heritage Day on Saturday in Winooski. Both are Burlington residents, although Mukeba's family is from the Democratic Republic of Congo. (Photo: JOEL BANNER BAIRD/FREE PRESS)

Several Québécois milled through the throng, as did a solitary, French-speaking Belgian.

Crudités and baguettes transcended barriers of verb tense and grammar.

Mayor Seth Leonard welcomed the crowd, beginning with a confession that college professors had finally steered him away from pursuing language studies.

Then Leonard grew a little serious.

"It's important to recognize the cultural foundation on which this city was built," he said.

This story was first published online July 11, 2015.

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Emma Entis-Lilienfeld of Burlington, scans her assortment of baked goods Saturday at French Heritage Day in Winooski. Entis-Lilienfeld's wares are from the Good Companion Bakery in Ferrisburgh (re-named "Boulangerie du Bon Compagnon" at the event). (Photo: JOEL BANNER BAIRD/FREE PRESS)



Hands-on history: The Blend-Montague family of Winooski explores a weaving display on Saturday at the downtown Heritage Mill Museum during French Heritage Day. From left: Alexis Blend, 8; Luke Montague, Juniper Montague, 2; Charlotte Blend and Adelaide Montague, 2. (Photo: JOEL BANNER BAIRD/FREE PRESS)

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