

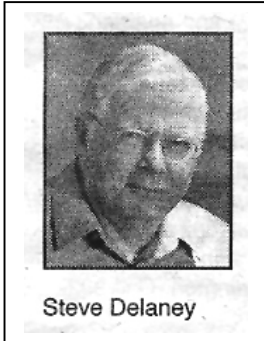
# *Celebrate Lake Champlain's Quadricentennial*

2009 Events Guide

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## French-Canadian roots run deep in Vermont

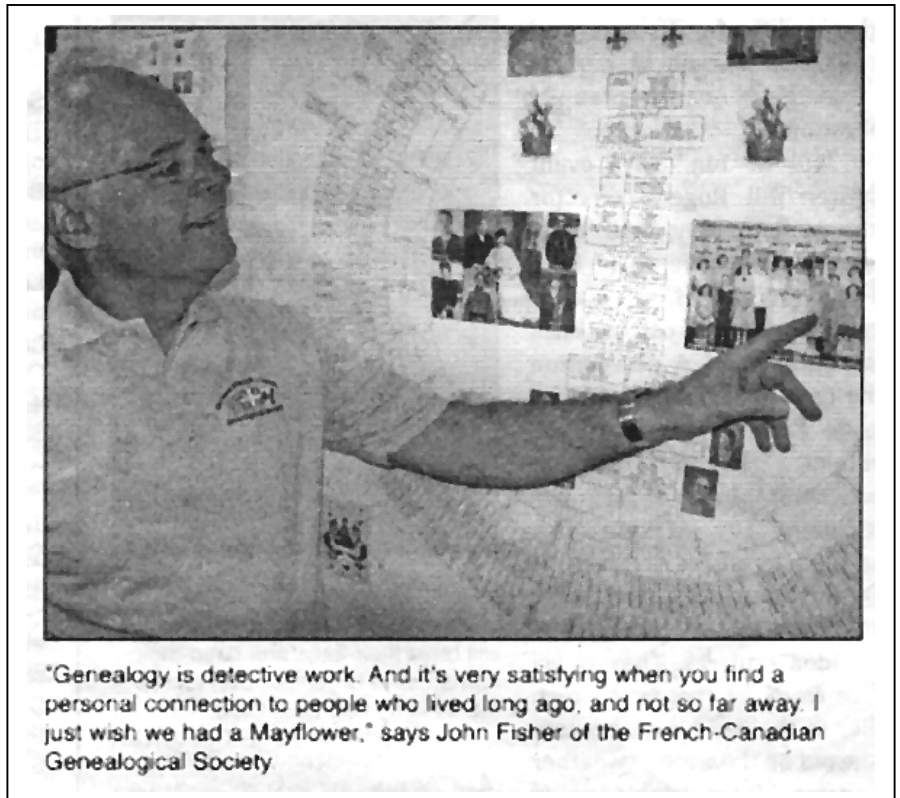
BY STEVE DELANEY *For The Champlain Valley Newspaper Group*



Steve Delaney

"When you get into the smaller places," says Rae Laitres of St. Albans, "Its very welcoming. My special place is Mansonville in the Eastern Townships. I think I go there just to be there. Its a cultural link thats very important to me." Rae Laitres is among the hundreds of Vermonters who trace their French-Canadian ancestry through the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society in Colchester. She travels to Quebec a dozen times a year.

"I've got at least 22 (ancestral) lines that trace back to the First Families of Quebec, and probably more. Louis Hebert was one of them." That's A-bear, not Hee-bert. When the Jamestown colony was still being planned in Old England, Louis Hebert was already living in New France, in whats now Nova Scotia. By the time the Mayflower sailed for Massachusetts 16 years later, Hebert and dozens of early settlers had founded Quebec City. Hebert is considered the first pioneer in French Canada, and the names of almost 50 other families are listed on his monument in Quebec.

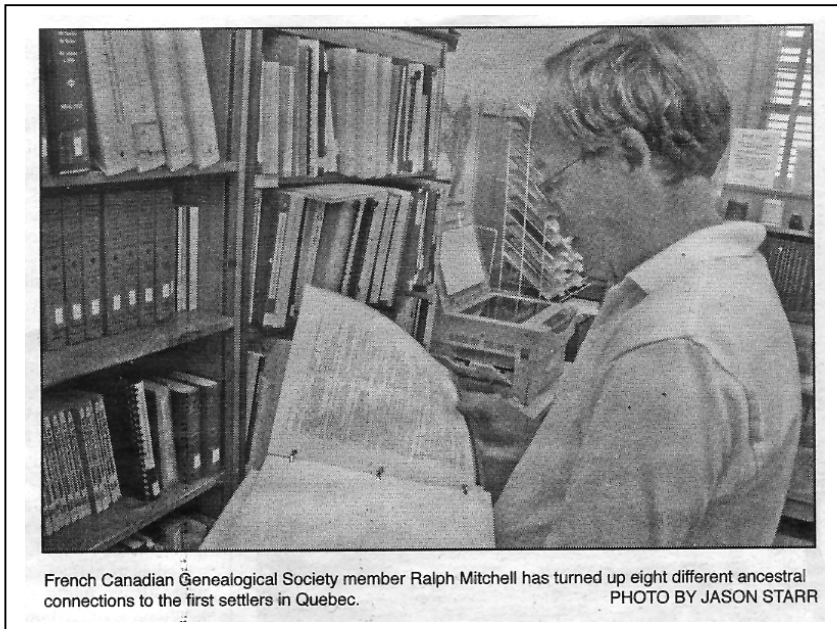


"Genealogy is detective work. And it's very satisfying when you find a personal connection to people who lived long ago, and not so far away. I just wish we had a Mayflower," says John Fisher of the French-Canadian Genealogical Society

An enormous percentage of today's French Canadians, including many living in Vermont, can trace their ancestry to those 47 settler families who lived in Quebec when Samuel de Champlain was there in the early 1600s. One descendant is Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. She'll be able to wear this year's popular lapel button, "They Walked with Champlain". It's available to those who can trace their families to the first settlers in French Canada, and is distributed through the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society.

Its president, Sheila Morris, says interest in French-Canadian ancestry has "exploded" among Vermonters since public awareness began growing about the 400th anniversary of Samuel de Champlain's expedition into the lake that now bears his name. Morris says the first settlers identified in Quebec all knew

Champlain, and that many had sailed with him on some of the 21 voyages the explorer made to and from the New World. "My own ancestor was Marin Boucher," Morris says, and points to a Family Tree that traces the dozen-generation linkage between her and the Quebec settler who lived 400 years ago. That chart is on display at the Genealogical Society's library and research center. It's located in the Dupont Building off Hegeman Avenue in Fort Ethan Allen, where there's an open house from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. every Saturday through June, and from 3 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. on Tuesdays. Members of the Colchester based organization, (\$25 a year) get access to the Society's parish records from Quebec, and from Vermont churches, as well as vital records from towns and villages.



Society member Ralph Mitchell has turned up eight different ancestral connections to those first settlers. Joan Flynn is a retired surgical nurse living in Essex. She can trace an even dozen of her family lines as far back as the Champlain Companions, and enjoys encouraging others to find their own links to their immigrant Ancestors. "Some of them need a little encouragement. You sometimes have to wean them off the idea that a given name is always spelled the same. A lot of breakthrough discoveries come after you look at alternate spellings."

Another well-known figure whose ancestor is on the list is Marcelle Leahy, the bilingual wife of Senator Patrick Leahy. She grew up in Newport, Vermont, and has said Etienne Racine was her link to the early Quebec settlers.

Sheila Morris, the Society's president, says there were eventually about 8,500 French families living in Canada by the time the British took over Quebec in 1760. "Almost all of us can trace our heritage back to those families, if we look hard enough." She adds that the inflow of new pioneer families from France tapered off quickly after the British took control. "The British were rough on the Canadiens, burned a lot of villages, and took the best areas for themselves. But almost all the families stayed put and rebuilt. Large scale immigration to the U.S. didn't start until the 19th century when industrial jobs opened up in New England."

In Vermont, there's a swath of towns in the northern and western parts of the state where the density of French Canadian settlement is highest. The 1990 Census reveals that over 60 percent of the surnames in Swanton are of French origin. In Georgia, its 53 per cent, and in Milton, 42 per cent. There are pockets in towns with industrial bases; but the 19th Century arrivals were largely agricultural settlers who show up strongly in Addison, Chittenden, Franklin and Lamoille Counties.

John Fisher is considered the founding spirit of the genealogy library's research effort to publish the vital records from Catholic parishes all over Vermont. So far, there are 30 volumes, with dozens to go. The first records were gleaned from the oldest parishes, in St Albans, Milton and Swanton. "I grew up in the Old North End of Burlington," he says. "And nobody there spoke French". Across the river in Winooski, everybody spoke French. Fisher says his family name was listed twice in the Burlington phone book for

decades. "It would say under Fisher, see Poissant (the French translation), and under Poissant, it would say, see Fisher." Fisher has traced his family lines back into Colonial Quebec, and says he was motivated by the effort, not always successful, to find the immigrant ancestor in each line. "Genealogy is detective work," he says. "And its very satisfying when you find a personal connection to people who lived long ago, and not so far away. "I just wish we had a Mayflower." There was no single ship with a complete roster of passengers and crew; rather the French simply trickled into New France through the first few decades of the 17th century.

The retired IBM programmer sharpened his computer skills to guide the Colchester library's acquisition of records to push the family trees back yet another generation, to find yet another First Family ancestor. He too, sees interest peaking in this year of the Champlain Quadncentennial.

The French Canadian Genealogical Society can be reached at P. O. Box 65128, Burlington, VT 05406, or at [www.vt-fcgs.org](http://www.vt-fcgs.org) or by phone at (802) 864-6037.