



# North Country Notes

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## Champlain: Four Hundred Years Later

Anastasia Pratt

In 1907, the New York State Legislature established a commission to celebrate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Samuel de Champlain's travels in this region and "discovery" of Lake Champlain. Referring to that July 1609 event as "an event worthy of commemoration in the annals of the State and nation," the Champlain Tercentenary Commission planned many of activities. In our region, honored guests like President Taft and Governor Hughes convened on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1909, at the Catholic Summer School of America in Cliff Haven to begin the festivities. They spoke at length about the history of this region, before and after Champlain; they dedicated verse to the history. When they later moved on to the Plattsburgh Barracks and the Hotel Champlain, they continued to celebrate. A grand parade and activities drew throngs of people to Plattsburgh and honored that past.

Our turn to remember came in 2009, the year of the Quadricentennial. We, who live so close to the lake that Champlain described as being "near some mountains" and as having "four beautiful islands," have sought ways to celebrate our history and our heritage. With this 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we have commemorated Champlain's discovery and also honored the First Nations people who lived here before he arrived; we have honored the French-Canadian heritage of our region while also placing it within a specific historic context.

The history forged by Samuel de Champlain's explorations in New France and along Lake Champlain is evident throughout Clinton County. Our towns, streets, lake—even our lake creature—are named for him; our families settled here

after the way was opened through his campaigns. Within that rich history—full of moments of glory and moments of defeat—we have a heritage and a responsibility to future generations. Through commemorating the Quadricentennial, we are passing down an understanding of ourselves, of our community, and of our time. In remembering Champlain's voyage along Lake Champlain, we begin the work of writing our own history.

Yet we must ask, "What is that history?"

Firstly, it is the history of First Nations people who traveled along the lake and treated the western portion of the Champlain Valley as a hunting ground. Though it is possible that one or two small communities were developed around Plattsburgh, it is far more likely that this area was not permanently inhabited before European colonization. The Algonquin response to the area indicates that: they moved carefully through the Champlain Valley, a region of meetings between groups, becoming more cautious as they were leaving the valley and entering Mohawk territory.

For another thing, it is the history of Champlain's voyage south from Quebec City and along Lake Champlain until he reached Ticonderoga. During the journey, he wrote of the mountains, the lake, the lush vegetation, and the wide variety of animals he encountered. For two weeks, as he waited for his guides to find the conditions suitable to safely continue, Champlain explored the lake and surrounding lands. When he departed the region, he left a piece of himself behind, giving this lake his name.



## Champlain cont.

Champlain's first impressions of this region were quite positive. Although the First Nations guides were busy trying to ensure their collective safety as they approached Ticonderoga, Champlain and his fellow European travelers were able to enjoy this new place. And so, Champlain wrote, "There are many pretty islands here, low, and containing very fine woods and meadows, with abundance of fowl and such animals of the chase as stags, fallow-deer, fawns, roe-bucks, bears, and others, which go from the main land to these islands."

Although we celebrate his journeys and his life, we do not know much about the man Samuel de Champlain; that uncertainty is another facet of our history. Despite creating painstaking journals and maps of his travels, Champlain wrote very little about himself. As David Hackett Fischer explains, Champlain's actions provide the best clue to his life. We know that Champlain was a soldier, an explorer, a cartographer, and a prolific writer. From his writings, we know that Champlain actively observed the natural world, chronicling the fauna, flora, and animal life of every region he visited. We also know that Champlain committed himself to settling New France and, in doing so, helped to settle this region.

Champlain's dedication to setting New France leads to yet another feature of our history: our population draws heavily on a Franco-American heritage. More than simply boasting a plethora of French names, the Champlain Valley's residents carry on French-Canadian traditions in their food, their celebrations, and their family lives. Those traditions, in large part, come to us through the path established by Champlain. By establishing a permanent settlement in Quebec City and then extending that settlement, Champlain and his partners established a new world for French colonists. The *seigneuries* established as a result extended far south of the present-day US-Canadian border, beginning the French settlement of the Champlain Valley. After the French ceded these lands to the

British, that French culture continued with migrations back and forth across the border for work, religion, and family.

Our history, in fact, is one that highly values work, spiritual belief, and family. From the farms that pepper the Champlain Valley to the mills strategically positioned alongside the valley's many rivers, this region has thrived because of hard work. Our ancestors frequently defined themselves by their work, taking on names like "Miller" or "Boullanger" to show the world their trade.

Those same ancestors felt a strong need to showcase their faith. As a result, our region is blessed with a multitude of places of worship, ranging from Catholic and Protestant churches to synagogues. Some of our communities—like the Quaker Union in Peru—were founded according to religious principles. In other instances, community members worked side by side to raise the money for a place of worship, as was the case for St. Peter's Church in Plattsburgh.

Underlying both our history of hard work and of faith is a sense of the importance of the family. The Champlain Valley's history is full of families, of men, women, and children who worked together to build a life. They created our history, bringing us the traditions of the past and a rich cultural heritage.

Over the course of 2009, we have celebrated that heritage through concerts, historic marker dedications, symposia, historic and artistic exhibitions, and family festivals. Champlain's legacy, as shown in the Quadricentennial Celebrations, is varied and fascinating. Whether a dramatic consideration of Champlain's return to the Champlain Valley after 400 years or a genealogical quest to find out if our ancestors were among those earliest settlers of New France, we have tried to remember those who came before us and to honor our past.



## Champlain cont.

Although our celebrations have not repeated those of 1909, we, too, have left a lasting mark on the historical landscape by celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Samuel de Champlain's arrival in the region now known as northern New York. To see that heritage, we can look at the historic markers and monuments that have been erected and dedicated over the course of the year. We can also look toward the "Clinton County History through the Eyes of its Children" mosaic, recently unveiled at the Clinton County Government Center. In many ways, that mosaic is the most elegant statement of this region's history: an artistic project undertaken by seventh grade students throughout the county that offers a timeline of life in the county from the era before Champlain arrived until 1880.

Our work has made the history of Clinton County and of the Champlain Valley accessible to everyone who visits. As the County Historian, I am humbled and gratified by that hard work. Collectively, we have carried the torch passed on by our ancestors and fulfilled our responsibility to future generations in truly celebrating an historic year.

### 2009 Markers

The Quadricentennial year of Champlain's discovery of the lake has motivated all in Clinton County to construct lasting reminders of 2009. The most amazing is the Clinton County History mural built of tiles designed by school children and affixed to the south wall of the County Government Center. Do drive into the Court St. parking lot and examine this up close. Congratulations to County Historian Anastasia Pratt and the other adults who helped conceive and execute this unique project.



(Markers continued)

Town of Chazy historian Bob Cheeseman unveiled "Chazy Landing Auto Ferry" on the Lakeshore Road in July.

In the Town of Ausable, a new marker "Keese Homestead" replaced an older one at the corner of Harkness and Union roads.

Peru town historians Ron and Carol Allen dedicated two new markers on Route 9: "Port Jackson" at the Valcour Conference Center, and "Peru Landing" just north of the Ausable Point Campsite entrance.



Beekmantown historian Addie Shields was responsible for 7 new markers that were unveiled Sept 10th prior to the annual Culver Hill ceremony of the week-long Battle of Plattsburgh Commemoration: "Stage Coach Stop of 1815" on the Spellman Road at Moffitt Rd.; "Oliver Dickson Homestead" on Dickson Point Road; "The Hazen Road" further south on Dickson Point Road; "Beekmantown Corners" on Route 22 at O'Neil Rd.; "West Beekmantown" on Military Turnpike by old Howard Tavern near Duquette Road; "Rea Sawmill Pond" on Greta Howe Lane just off Route 22; and "East Beekmantown Methodist-Episcopal Church" on Route 22 at the Burke Rd.

The Town of Champlain also dedicated a marker, along with its new Town Park, during Battle of Plattsburgh Commemoration week, on Rt. 276 just south of historic Dewey's Tavern.

The City of Plattsburgh put in new landscaping at Champlain Monument Park, power-washed the monument and the brickwork walks and restored to visibility the inscriptions of the monument sculptor and architect.



## The Glass Negative Portraits Project

By Roger Black

The Clinton County Historical Association possesses a priceless collection of glass negatives, mainly of portrait photos. The collection is huge, well in excess of 10,000. And it is old, dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. But most important, this collection is about the ancestors of living Clinton County residents.

The goal of the Portraits Project is to help bring together residents whose families lived in this region 100 or more years ago with these timeless images of their ancestors.

Matching the glass negatives with enough information to identify the families to whom they belong is not a simple process, however. In fact, for the great majority of the portraits, we only have a name and a rough idea of when the photo was taken. But for a precious few, perhaps 2,000 to 3,000, we have scraps of information that can tell us something additional about the person in the photo. It's our belief that if we can tie together these scraps of information, we can identify the person in the photo to enough of a degree that some lucky families will be able to actually look upon long passed family members as they appeared 100 or more years ago.

The keys to revealing this information can be found in a few sitting logs kept by the portrait studios in Plattsburgh at the beginning of the 20th century.

Most of the negatives include a name and a number scratched into the glass. Sometimes the names are very hard to make out. Often the exact spelling is very difficult to identify. But portraits studios kept a daily log of their portrait photo sessions. These logs include an exact date the photo was taken, a person's name and, in a precious few cases, the town where the person lived.

When we can match up the name and number from the glass negative with a name and number in a

portrait sitting log, we then know who the photo subject is and exactly when the photo was taken. If the sitting log includes an address, then we can identify, with some certainty, the residence of the subject. To some degree, based on the appearance of the person in the photo, we can guess an approximate age and therefore an approximate year of birth.

### THE PROCESS

The process of culling this information is labor intensive and time consuming. And the photos have to be handled with utmost care; they are in many cases brittle and easily damaged.

The process we use to gather the information involves several steps, which we repeat for each letter of the alphabet. Fortunately, most of the photos have already been grouped by the first letter of the last name. They are not fully alphabetized yet, but just being grouped by the first letter of the last name is a huge help and we are extremely gratefully to the CCHA volunteers of the past who helped in this process.

So for each letter of the alphabet, we begin by identifying which glass negatives have a sitting log number that falls within the range of numbers for which we have sitting logs. Those glass negatives are separated out for further identification. The rest of the glass negatives are regrouped by the first two or three letters of the last name to make future searches faster and easier to accomplish.

For each glass negative with a sitting log identification number that falls within the range of numbers for which we have sitting logs, we look up the information provided by the original photographic studio. This information is entered into a computer worksheet. It includes: Photo ID number, the exact date the photo was taken, last name, first name or initials (when available), title when available (Mr., Mrs., Miss, Dr., etc.), residence (if available), any



## Portraits Project Continued



Clark Family of Peru  
October 4, 1902

additional information about the person or photo, and whether the photo has been scanned and converted to a digital image format (tif).

### WHAT HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED SO FAR

Every photo we identify is not scanned and digitized. We simply do not have the time to accomplish that. We tend to choose those photos for which we have been able to collect the most information, in particular the photos where we know the residence of the subject.

So how many photos have we entered into the computer database and scanned? After about 18 months of work (admittedly accomplished in brief spurts) and with almost half of the alphabet examined, we have identified about 1,000 glass negatives using the sitting logs and scanned in a little more than a quarter of those.

One thing to keep in mind, though, is that of the 5,000+ glass negatives we have examined so far, all have names attached, in almost all cases we can

estimate within a year or two when the photo was taken and all lived in Clinton County at one time. So even if you can't find a name among those we examined that matches an ancestor who lived in Clinton County around the turn of the last century, we may still have that photo in our archives. And now that we have reorganized the negatives for the first half of the alphabet, searching for portraits by last name is somewhat less daunting than it would have been a few years ago.

### MAKING THE SCANNED PHOTOS AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC

While we will continue over the coming months (and years?) to examine and identify photos for the last half of the alphabet, our next major task will be to publish online representative portrait photos from the collection along with a list of all the names we have confirmed by use of the portrait studio sitting logs. We are actually closer to completing that task than you might expect. And if all goes according to plan, the Clinton County Historical Association will use an online system that will allow any user to order and pay for reprints of any of the published portrait photos and have the reprint shipped directly to your home.

Another proposal under consideration is, for a modest fee, to conduct searches of the glass negative archive to identify whether there are photos with a specific surname that has not been identified through use of the portrait studio sitting logs.

The Glass Negative Portraits Project is a fascinating journey to a time 100 or more years ago when having a family or individual portrait photo taken was a special occasion. Clearly, these portraits held great value to the families involved. It will be an amazing accomplishment when the Clinton County Historical Association can bring these images back to life and match them up with the families of living relatives.



## The Glass Negative Portraits Project

Mr. & Mrs. T. H. Harney, Peru  
June 12, 1902



Children of Robert Guibord  
Plattsburgh, Oct. 1904



### Memberships, Donations and Other Support Received From March 15, 2009 through September 16, 2009

Adirondack Community Trust, Jane and Joe Alexander, Stasia Arcarese, Ara Asadourian, Ausable Chasm Company, Jim and Anne Bailey, Thomas C. Beach, Marie Beemer, Terrence and Michele Branon, Brown Funeral Home, Bruce Butterfield, Carol Prevost-Meier, Caterpillar Foundation, Jane Claffey, Shirley Coffey, Linda Lee Coryer, Irene and Herbert Cottrell, Luke and Lisa Cyphers, Larry and Christine Davidson, Jim and Caroline Dawson, Conrad and Vreni DeBeaufort, Janet Deeb, Suzanne DeForge, Heidi Dennis and Roger Columbus, Mark and Alita Desso, Cheryl Dodds, Steven and Deborah Dolgin, Joseph and Katherine Donnery, Thelma Douglas, Julie Dowd, John Drown, Marybeth Dunajski, James Durgan, Geri Favreau, John and Andree Fisher, Forrence Orchards, Gina and Maurice Gilbert, Maurica Gilbert and Noel Sowley, Irving and Eleanor Goldman, Ramona Harlem, Roger Harwood, Ellen Heyman, Ralph and Jane Hubbell, Richard Jarrette and Christie O'Neil, Jean Jones, Jim King, William Krueger and Suzy Johnson, Arthur and Rosemary LaMarche, William Laundry, Chantal LeFebvre, Ernest and Roxie LeMay, Patricia Lewis, Lights Jewelers, Sonia Long, William Manning, Marshall and Ann Maynard, William and Scarlett McBride, Mark and Deena McCullough, Elizabeth McKee, Meadowbrook Healthcare, Elizabeth Metz, Lauren Mihalek, Tom Monette, Donald Moore and Haila Conant, Thomas and Katherine Murnane, William and Barbara Murray, Nine Platt Corp-Best Western, Sam Northshield, Nancy Olsen, Joanne and Jack Orr, Victor Pawlewicz, Charles and Shelley Payson, Gordon and Sandra Pollard, Anastasia Pratt, Sharon Ratner, Charles and Jean Raymond, Bill and Bunny Rowe, John and Judy Russell, Sample Lumber Co., Edward and Jean Schiffler, Paul Seifried, Curt and Michele Snyder, Ed Stansbury, Janet Stemmer, Stewart's Foundation, Noel and Debbie Stewart, Sue Ellen Albright, Dorothy Todd, Town of Beekmantown, Town of Plattsburgh, Ultra Wave, Inc., George and Marcia Wagner, Jackie and Alan Walker, Connie Wheeler, Peggy Whipple, Anna and Lynn Wilke, Robert Williams, William and Lucy Wilson, Dale and Ruth Wolfe, and Clinton County.

Gifts dedicated to the Lighthouse: Adirondack Architectural Heritage, Roger Harwood, Valerie Jodoin



## Our New Director

After an extensive search, the Clinton County Historical Museum has a new director/curator. Carol Blakeslee-Collin began work in early September. Blakeslee-Collin assumes her new position upon completing her Masters in Education and after an extensive career in broadcast journalism as a producer at the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer and ABC News 20/20. Blakeslee-Collin says she had the great fortune to work with the likes of Robert MacNeil, Jim Lehrer, Ted Koppel, Sandy Vanocur, Judy Woodruff, Ray Suarez, and other gifted reporters. Over three decades, she produced hundreds of stories covering politics, the economy, the environment, education, defense, foreign policy, and the arts, winning a number of awards along the way, including a National Emmy for a story on farming and a fellowship at the University of Chicago.

In the 1990's, Blakeslee-Collin began to spend vacation time in the Adirondacks and then in 2004, she and her husband made the huge decision to move from Washington, D.C. to the North Country where she became executive producer and head of production at Mountain Lake PBS. In 2006, while taking care of her parents she decided to pursue her Masters at SUNY Plattsburgh. One of the main reasons for the career change was her deep interest in history and her desire to pass her enthusiasm on to young people.

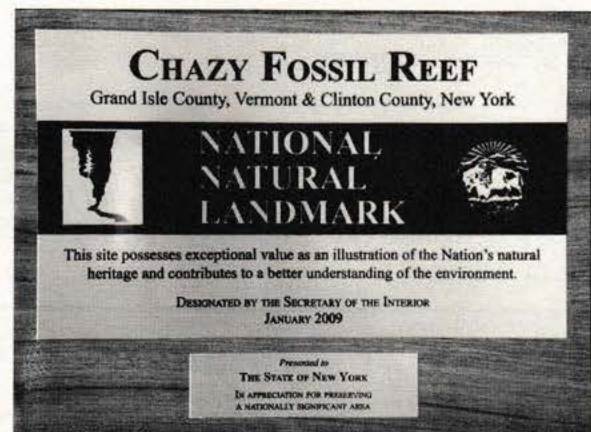
CCHA's President Roger Harwood says, "We're excited to have Carol leading us as we move forward expanding our programs and public interest. Carol has hit the ground running. Please stop by and see her." Specific areas of interest to Blakeslee-Collin are Adirondack and Lake Champlain environmental history, the North Country Underground Railroad, and the Battle of Valcour. She hopes to make the restoration of the light and sound in Arto Monaco's diorama of the Battle of Valcour and the Battle of Plattsburgh one of her first priorities. Another priority is the creation of a new museum education program in collaboration with local teachers that uses local historic sites, the museum collection, and the classroom.

But for now, Blakeslee-Collin is learning the museum which she likens to researching a huge new story. She sees many parallels between being a journalist, educator, and museum director. Like a producer and teacher, a museum director plans ahead assiduously only to see the best laid plans fall apart. Like a journalist and educator, a museum director is part sage, part guide, part impresario, and requires doing many things at once.

Blakeslee-Collin lives with her husband Jim in Keeseville where they are restoring an old stone house on Main Street built between 1823 and 1825 by Richard Keese II, part of the family the town is named for.

## New Plaque at the Lighthouse

On September 12, 2009 CCHA received a National Natural Landmark plaque at Isle LaMotte to be displayed at the Lighthouse. Valcour Island and Garden island are part of the Chazy Reef. "The Chazy Fossil Reef is significant as the oldest known occurrence of a biologically diverse fossil reef, the earliest appearance of fossil coral in a reef environment, and the first documented example of the principle of ecological faunal succession (the process of change in an ecosystem over time.)" <http://www.lakechamplaincommittee.org/learn/lake-look/chazy-reef/>





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## New in the Gift Shop

***Bastions on the Border*** by James P. Millard: Experience the remarkable story of the last fortifications constructed along storied Lake Champlain! Finally, a book that explores and delivers the truth about infamous Fort "Blunder" and Fort Montgomery on the US/Canada border at Rouses Point. Illustrated with over 200 rare photographs, documents and plans. \$19.95

***Lake Champlain: An Illustrated History***, published by Adirondack Life. The story of Lake Champlain, well-written and lavishly illustrated. This large hardcover will make a wonderful gift at \$35.00, which is \$10.00 less than the cover price. Chapters include *Towns Along the Lake*, *The First People*, and *Sport and Play on Lake Champlain*.

## December Speaker

***The Day the President Came to Town and the Great Champlain Tercentenary Celebration of 1909*** with Sylvie Beaudreau. Monday, Dec. 7, 2009 at the Museum. Program begins at 7 pm and with refreshments to follow.

**Annual Meeting at the Museum**  
Saturday, November 7, 2009, 1 to 3 PM