

Explorateur

Samuel Champlain *intrepid explorer*

By Charles Vandrei

When most New Yorkers think of Samuel Champlain, they might recall him as the Father of New France (Canada), the sailor and cartographer who founded Quebec City, or the explorer who opened up the fur trade with Europe. Some may recall the story of his 1609 military adventure, with his Huron and Algonquin allies, against the Mohawk Iroquois which led him to become the first European to enter, explore and wonder at the territory we now know as New York. Perhaps most familiar is the lake that bears his name, and forms the partial border between New York, Quebec, and Vermont.

Born into a family of mariners in Brouage, France, on the Bay of Biscay about 1570, by 1609 Champlain was accomplished in many areas. He was an experienced soldier, having fought in many of France's civil and religious conflicts of the late sixteenth century. He

was also an accomplished sailor, having spent his early years learning the ways of the sea, traveling to the Caribbean and Mexico. During these trips he developed an interest in the people, plants and animals of the New World. At some point, Champlain joined and eventually came to lead a group of explorers who would follow up on the 1530's voyages of Jacques Cartier. Cartier had come into contact with a number of native groups who told him of the lakes and waterways of interior North America. It would be

In 1608, Champlain and a few dozen hardy companions founded the settlement that would become modern-day Quebec City.

70 years before a serious effort was made to follow up on these leads, led by none other than Samuel Champlain.

During Champlain's first trip to North America, in 1603, he explored the Atlantic

coast of Canada and the lower St. Lawrence River in large and small boats, and on foot. He met many Native American peoples along the way, and felt they were interesting in appearance and in their ways of life. He also found them friendly and willing to share their knowledge and their world. Like many explorers and adventurers, Champlain was fascinated by stories of the people and places that were just out of sight; he wanted to go and see for himself. Over the next 30 years, Champlain would see many of the people and places that were

just over the horizon. (In all, he made some 21 trips across the Atlantic Ocean.)

After several fruitless attempts to create settlements along the coasts of Nova Scotia and Maine, Champlain continued



to explore the St. Lawrence River and the Atlantic Coast as far south as Cape Cod. Eventually, he met with success. In 1608, he and a few dozen hardy companions founded the settlement that would become modern-day Quebec City. This settlement was critical to the foundation of New France and our modern northern neighbor, Canada. Although he would later be forced to surrender the city to England, a treaty between France and England once again returned Quebec to French rule.

Over the years, Champlain became an accomplished cartographer, creating numerous detailed and impressively accurate charts of the coasts he explored. In 1632, he produced one of the earliest maps showing what is now New York State. Included on the map are the St. Lawrence River, Lakes Ontario and Erie, Lake Champlain, Lake George, Long Island, the future Hudson River, and what appears to be the Genesee River and possibly even the Oswegatchie. The sizes and shapes of these waterways are distorted, but the basic orientations and layouts ring true.

Although he never appears to have learned the languages of any native groups he met, Champlain was always



National Archives of Canada

keen on establishing friendly relations. Unlike many early European explorers, Champlain saw the Native Americans as equals, people deserving consideration, respect and understanding. In fact, a number of historians have noted that his commitment to join his native allies in their expedition to Iroquois country (upstate New York) stemmed more from his desire to prove his friendship than his desire for military glory or conquest.

Champlain's first trip to New York was in June 1609. After his allies assembled, feasted and held preparatory

ceremonies, they ascended the Richelieu River (then known as the River of the Iroquois). When the falls and rapids proved too difficult for the shallops (small European sailing craft) in which he and his men traveled, most of his French companions returned to Quebec. However, Champlain, 60 native warriors and two French volunteers continued paddling south in bark canoes. On July 4, the party entered the large lake that would later be named for Champlain, a mere two months before Henry Hudson would sail into the state from the south.

After paddling along first the eastern and later the western shore, Champlain provided some of the earliest descriptions of the lake, its islands, plants and animals. He wrote of passing beautiful islands covered in wild grape vines, pine and chestnut trees. Most likely he was writing of the larger islands in the lake: those known today as Isle La Motte, North Hero, Grande Isle and Valcour, but he probably noted Crab and Schuyler islands as well. He described the now Green Mountains of Vermont as being snow-covered, and noted that although the Adirondacks were just as high in elevation, they were not snow-covered. Always interested in the New World's

Born into a family of mariners in Brouage, France about 1570, by 1609 Champlain was accomplished in many areas.

fish and wildlife, Champlain described seeing several varieties of deer, perhaps elk, moose, and white-tailed deer. He observed the rivers that flowed into the lake as being filled with beaver.

Champlain described what is likely a Lake Champlain gar pike (*Lepisosteus osseus*), as being five feet long, with a body as thick as his thigh, and a head the size of two fists. The fish had a snout two-and-a-half feet long and a double row of pointed teeth. He noted that the fish's body was protected by scales which were silver gray in color. Some writers have attributed the ongoing story of Champ, North America's own Loch Ness monster, as being derived from Champlain's description of what was clearly a native fish species.

Traveling cautiously and only at night, making fortified fireless camps by day, the party continued to move, as they perceived it, closer and closer to enemy territory. Somewhere near where the lake narrows to what later writers would call the river, Champlain and his companions encountered a group of about 200 Iroquois (probably Mohawk) warriors. After initial taunts and a parley it was agreed that they would fight in the morning.

On the morning of July 30, the two

forces met. After initial maneuvering, a fusillade of arrows was loosed by both sides. At the urging of his allies, Champlain stepped forward with his triple loaded arquebus (an early musket) and killed two and fatally wounded a third enemy chief. A few moments later, his two companions fired their weapons as well, killing several more. Never having encountered gunpowder before, the Mohawk force recoiled in surprise and began to falter. Soon they were routed. In the few hours available after the fight, Champlain explored the south end of the lake and appears to have visited the beautiful falls at La Chute where Lake George drains into Lake Champlain.

The exact location of this battle has never been established with certainty. Champlain described the engagement as taking place on a cape (peninsula) on the western side of the lake. Two locations at the south end of Lake Champlain, namely Crown Point and Ticonderoga, fit this description. Citing maps, Champlain's journals and a myriad of

supporting information, scholars have long argued for one location or the other. The debate over which is the authentic location has raged at least since the celebration of the three-hundredth anniversary of Champlain's foray into New York. This question may never be resolved with finality.

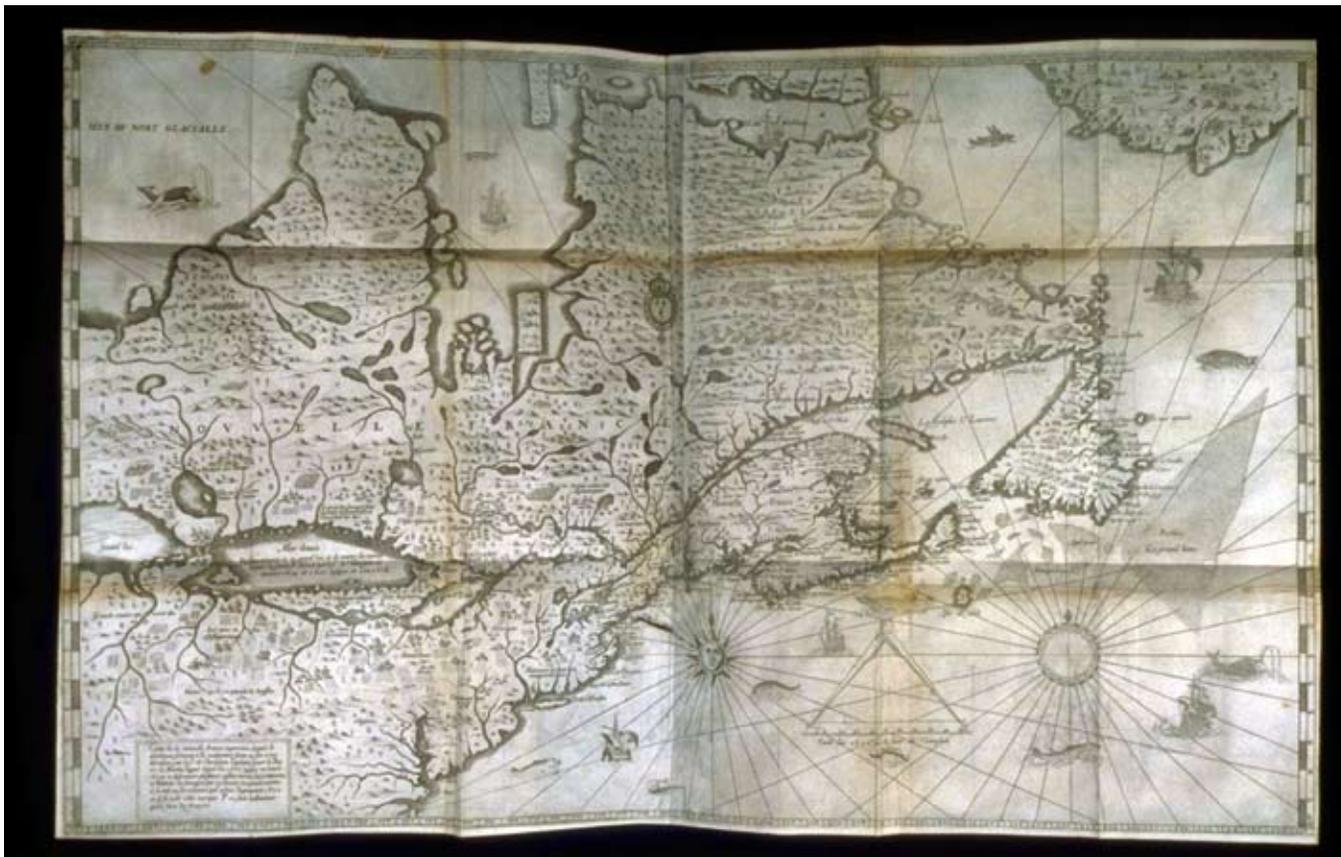
While Champlain continued to build New France, his interest in exploring and learning about the New World and its people did not falter. In 1610, a young colonist at Quebec, Etienne Brule, volunteered to live for a time with an Algonquin group to learn their language. Over a series of years, Brule traveled through the eastern Great Lakes including at least one trip to the homeland of the Seneca Iroquois in the Genesee Valley. Brule returned several times to report to Champlain on the details of what he saw and where he had traveled. These accounts provided early descriptions of the Great Lakes, the Finger Lakes and Niagara Falls. Champlain himself made a trip to Huronia (north of Georgian Bay on Lake Huron) and joined the Huron on a military expedition against an Onondaga Iroquois village near modern-day Syracuse. This attack was ultimately unsuccessful and Champlain's account of this trip is not as rich in detail as many of his other accounts of his travels. He was seriously wounded in battle and had to be carried for much of the return trip to Huronia.

Samuel Champlain died at Quebec on Christmas Day in 1635, much beloved as the founder and leader of New France. His legacy lives on to this day. Other explorers, missionaries, soldiers and settlers followed in his footsteps. St. Isaac Jogues, Rene Robert LaSalle and Pierre Radisson would be the best known among many. Most people are probably



Champlain's Battle Scene 1609. Drawn by Samuel de Champlain ca. 1613.

Champlain saw the native peoples of New York as equals, and even joined with many Native Americans of the Champlain Valley in fighting against the rival Iroquois. Here is a battle scene drawn by Champlain in 1613.

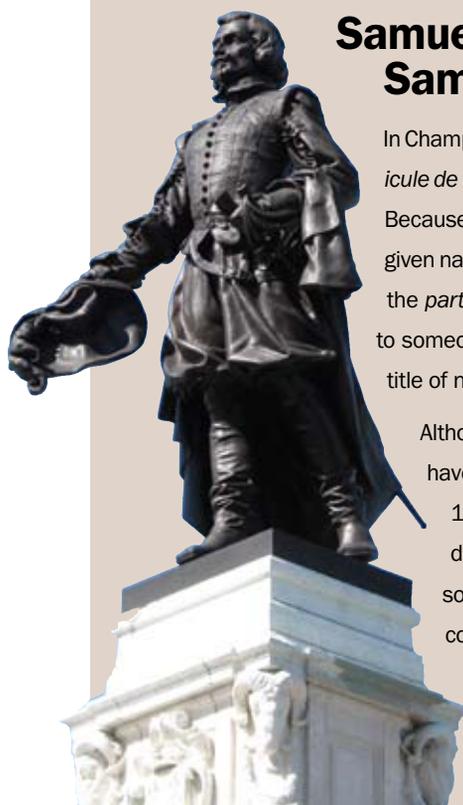


An accomplished cartographer, Samuel Champlain meticulously documented his voyages, including creating maps and drawings of the lands and peoples of the New World. Here is Champlain's hand-drawn map (circa 1632) of northeastern North America.

not aware that from the beginning of the seventeenth century, at least one-third of the territory of modern New York was considered to be a part of New France. Boundaries between French and British colonies were always vague, and they generally ignored any notions that native people may have held about such matters. In any case, major French trade, missionary and military posts were established at Niagara (1676 and again in 1726), Crown Point (Fort St. Frederic 1733), and Oswegatchie (La Presentation 1749).

The presence of powerful and influential Indian nations, access to vast natural resources, and easy travel along waterways would place modern-day New York at the center of a century-long conflict that ensued between France and Britain for control of the North American continent.

A student of archeology and a re-enactor of the Revolutionary War and French and Indian War, **Charles Vandrei** is DEC's Historic Preservation Officer.



What's in a name:

Samuel Champlain or Samuel de Champlain?

In Champlain's era, the honorific particle "de" (or *particule de noblesse*) was often associated with nobility. Because he was not born into nobility, Champlain's given name was simply Samuel Champlain. However, the *particule de noblesse* was sometimes awarded to someone worthy of respect but who had no clear title of nobility.

Although records differ, the honorific particle may have been added to Champlain's name about 1610, after his patron, King Henry IV was murdered. This usage by a non-noble was tolerated so that he would continue to gain access to the court during the rule of Henry's son, King Louis XIII, who was only nine years old at the time of his father's death.

—The Editor