



## Lake Champlain A Jewel in the Crown

by Colin Read

Two landmarks define the unique character and the visceral first regard for this region. The first of these, the beautiful Adirondack Mountains, are close enough to enjoy and just far enough to regard in their full magnifi-

cence. The second of these jewels resides in our own backyard, and has defined our history since the beginning of recorded time in this region.

Lake Champlain is truly a Great Lake, in every respect (even legislatively, for a

brief while). It is our jewel, but perhaps without the fancy setting of the Adirondacks. In keeping with our North Country modesty, we hide away this family jewel, and only bring it out for such events as the Mayor's Cup or the Battle of Plattsburgh celebrations.

Soon there will be a huge celebration for our lake's namesake, the great explorer Samuel de Champlain. After settling Quebec City, Champlain went on to explore the lake named in his honor. The Native Indians, then the French, the English, and the Revolutionaries, all recognized the lake's beauty, resources, and especially its strategic location as the bridge between the Great Lakes draining east and the Hudson River draining south.

This waterway connected Upper and Lower Canada to the colonies of New England, and was the center of water commerce for an immense Albany County, extending from the length of Lake Champlain all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. There was not a more significant waterway in those years.

Now, just about 400 years later, we have the opportunity to celebrate its importance in the lives of those giants who came before us and first recognized the magnificence of the North Country.

It seems fitting at this point in history to finally abandon our modesty and recognize our heritage. There is certainly no lack of respect for the lake, but there is a lack of celebration. I advocate we begin to share what we see in Lake Champlain – so that we can proudly beam as visitors remark how lucky we are to live adjacent to such a wonder for sportsmen, naturalists, and historians alike.

Now don't get me wrong. Lake Champlain does have its great fans and celebrators. Burlington, Vermont knows how to celebrate the lake and has incorporated it into the fabric of the downtown. Of course, there was a time they, too, underappreciated the lake, and it was not until after a concerted community effort that the lake was restored to its rightful place as the jewel of their fair city.

But we can do even better. We also have the Saranac River, with its headwaters in the Adirondacks, as the perfect connector between our twin jewels.

So, as the Samuel de Champlain quadricentennial draws near, would it not be fit-

ting to polish up the setting for the Lake Champlain jewel and the blue and white ribbon of river that joins it to the Adirondacks? Don't these two places deserve to be surrounded by more than vacant lots, parking lots, warehouses, and commercial sites? I sincerely believe Plattsburgh can be changed forever for the better by celebrating our shoreline and our riverfront and by creating pathways for strolling convention-goers and tourists, for cyclists and joggers, and for the citizens of the North Country. Just as in some cultures where all reverie points to Mecca, I would like to see our reverie point to Lake Champlain and the Saranac Riverfront.

This will not occur without a plan. But the plan need not be particularly costly, even if the benefits, in tourism, in property values, and in civic pride, would be well worth it. The plan especially needs a concerted effort in asking of each proposed project what they can do for the riverfront and the lakefront. We should encourage and provide infrastructure to any project that furthers this goal, and ask all other

projects along the river and lake to help us with such a master plan in other ways. And we should ask ourselves if existing uses of the river and lake fronts are the best uses for these areas.

If we can do this, I am certain that Plattsburgh could be significant in the same ways that cause visitors to leave Burlington with such a sense of awe. I know that boastful pride runs counter to our modesty. But I cannot imagine a better time to demonstrate our great personal pride in our community than the upcoming anniversary. Wouldn't it be amazing to imagine those arriving at our new Plattsburgh International Airport for our quadricentennial to be able to take a leisurely walk along the riverfront all the way from the airport terminal through a vitalized downtown core to a new hotel built right along Lake Champlain?

We would not be the first great city to celebrate a waterway. San Antonio, Texas has done amazing things with their Riverwalk. Burlington fully integrates its part of the Lake into city life. Even my old home-

towns of Fairbanks, Alaska; Kingston, Ontario; and Vancouver, Canada do great things with their respective river, lake, and ocean. None of these celebrations came overnight, and none came without considerable planning and some cost. But I know of no community that has two such great waterways to celebrate. I am sure no community chose to invest in the beauty and accessibility of a great waterway and went on to regret that choice. I know this community is immensely proud of what we have, and the business and civic community prides itself on never missing opportunities. Well, here is an opportunity.

Which just goes to show you the North Country is unique, in so many ways. ■



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