



The *Philadelphia II*, an exact replica of a 54-foot gunboat that fought in the Revolutionary War, is one of the most visited places at the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum. *photo: Betsy Frawley Haggerty*

# Vergennes, Vermont

## A Friendly Boating Haven on Lake Champlain

by **Betsy Frawley Haggerty**

*Vergennes, the “little city with a big heart” that prides itself on being Vermont’s oldest (1788) and the U.S.’s smallest incorporated city (population 2,588), is a hidden haven for Lake Champlain boaters, with three engaging attractions—a boater-friendly resort, a fascinating maritime museum and an iconic New England downtown with free overnight dockage hard by an impressive waterfall.*

### The Basin Harbor Club

For me, Vergennes was a welcome port in a storm a few years back when I was nearing the end of a “Little Loop” cruise, traveling from the Hudson River to the Hudson River aboard a 34-foot trawler, via the New York State Canals, Lake Ontario, the St. Lawrence Seaway (with a long stop in Montreal), the Richelieu River, the Chambly Canal and Lake Champlain. It was early October and we’d had glorious weather until we left Burlington, but as we made our way south along the lake, enjoying views of the Adirondacks on the west and the Green Mountains on the east, the skies darkened, the temperature dropped, heavy rain fell and the lake became a whitecap-laced dark gray that made for a bumpy ride. A friend had told us about a marina at the Basin Harbor Club on Vergennes’ Lake Champlain shore about 20 miles south of Burlington, and we headed there not knowing what to expect.

What we found was a friendly resort with a storied history where the marina staff welcomed us, suggested dinner at the nearby Red Mill Restaurant and recommended we explore the adjacent Lake Champlain Maritime Museum the next morning. That sounded like a plan since cold rain dominated the weather forecast.

We walked over to the Red Mill in damp boat clothes beneath drippy foul weather gear, and happily dined in a renovated 1940s sawmill, with pub-style fresh local food and Vermont craft beers, where no one paid any mind to our clothes. The hot, cheddar-ale soup was a winner, and the burgers hit the spot.

The Red Mill is just one of the restaurants in this 700-acre resort. Ardelia’s, named for Ardelia Beach, the woman who first opened the family farm to guests 1886, features white-tablecloth gourmet dining where guests dress for dinner. The North Dock offers summertime outdoor dining, with live music on some nights, and there are bars and/or cafes at the golf course, pool and boat club.



*photo: Betsy Frawley Haggerty*

Main Street Vergennes is home to eclectic shops, good restaurants and handsome 19th-century buildings.



*photo: Basin Harbor Club.*

Guests enjoy al fresco dining at Basin Harbor Club’s North Dock.



*photo: Betsy Frawley Haggerty*

Boaters can find free dockage near the handsome Otter Creek waterfall in Vergennes, just a short walk from the lively downtown shopping area.

Five generations and 133 years later, the Beach family still owns and operates the Basin Harbor Club as an upscale family-oriented, pet-friendly summer camp in a country village setting, with 40 guest rooms in the main lodge and 77 cottages scattered throughout the property. Amenities include an 18-hole golf course, five tennis courts, a spa and fitness center, a heated outdoor swimming pool, several shops, children's programs, a private dog beach, lakeside nature trails, narrated boat tours, a 66-slip marina and an airstrip. Overnight dockage includes access to all resort facilities, some with additional fees.

### The Lake Champlain Maritime Museum

After coffee and hot oatmeal on our boat, we walked over to the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, just ten minutes away. Its proximity to the Basin Harbor Club is no coincidence I learned when I visited again last summer. Bob Beach, Jr., Ardelia's great-grandnephew who runs the resort with his sister and niece, founded the museum with his friend Art Cohn in 1986 and essentially donated the property, leasing three-and-a-half-acres to the not-for-profit museum for \$1 year for 100 years.

Growing up, Beach told me, he'd listened to his grandfather's stories about Lake Champlain history. The many shipwrecks that lay on the lake's bottom fascinated him, and he began diving on the wreck of a large vessel in Basin Harbor.

In the 1980s a group of nautical archeologists, led by Art Cohn, came to explore the wreck, with Beach acting as the local expert. Cohn, also a history enthusiast, and Beach began talking about how great it would be if there were a place where the artifacts divers had discovered could be exhibited to tell the story of Lake Champlain. The next year they assembled a pictorial display of 10,000 years of Lake Champlain history and set it up in the Homestead, the oldest building at Basin Harbor. The following year a local resident donated an early 19th century stone schoolhouse for use as a museum building. Beach moved it to Basin Harbor and reconstructed it, and the museum was born, with the schoolhouse as its first building and Beach as chairman of the board and Cohn as executive director. Both men are still actively involved.

Today the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum and Research Institute has morphed from that single schoolhouse into a rustic campus with 16 buildings and an active waterfront cove that bring life to Lake Champlain's history through an array of compelling exhibits and active education and research programs. One could happily spend a day or two there, soaking in culture and learning the stories of the lake, its ships and its people.

The collections and exhibits include watercraft of all kinds, from dugout canoes to Hudson River iceboats and vintage Chris Craft runabouts; more than 100 outboard motors dating back to 1911, and an extensive history of Lake Champlain steamboats with posters, historic photos and artifacts. The Nautical

Archeology Center, a direct outgrowth of Beach's and Cohn's interest in diving, is widely respected, unusually interesting and often open to the public.

What researchers have learned from the 300 mostly intact shipwrecks preserved by the lake's cold, dark, deep water is amazing, and the results are shown throughout the museum. Nine of the shipwrecks are official Vermont and New York Underwater Historic Preserves open to registered divers. Twice a month, the museum and Basin Harbor Club take visitors on a ninety-minute narrated boat tour to explore the wreck of the steamship Champlain II, which sank in 1875. A remotely operated vehicle sends a live feed from the wreck to a screen aboard the tour boat.

One exhibit, Key to Liberty, uses shipwrecks from 1776 to tell the how a naval battle on Lake Champlain changed the outcome of the Revolutionary War. I got goose bumps when I touched the partially exploded cannon, recovered from the gunboat New York that killed a young Massachusetts sailor named Thomas Rogers on October 11, 1776 at the Battle of Valcour Island. A replica of his gravestone stands near the cannon.

My favorite moment came when museum docent Michael Beller handed me a 12-pound Revolutionary War cannonball as we stood on the deck of the 54-foot gunboat Philadelphia II, an exact replica of one of the ships that American hero (later infamous traitor) Benedict Arnold lost in the battle of Valcour Island. I'd seen the original Philadelphia, which was raised in tact from the bottom of the lake in 1935, at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. just a few months before. Holding the hefty bruised cannonball in my

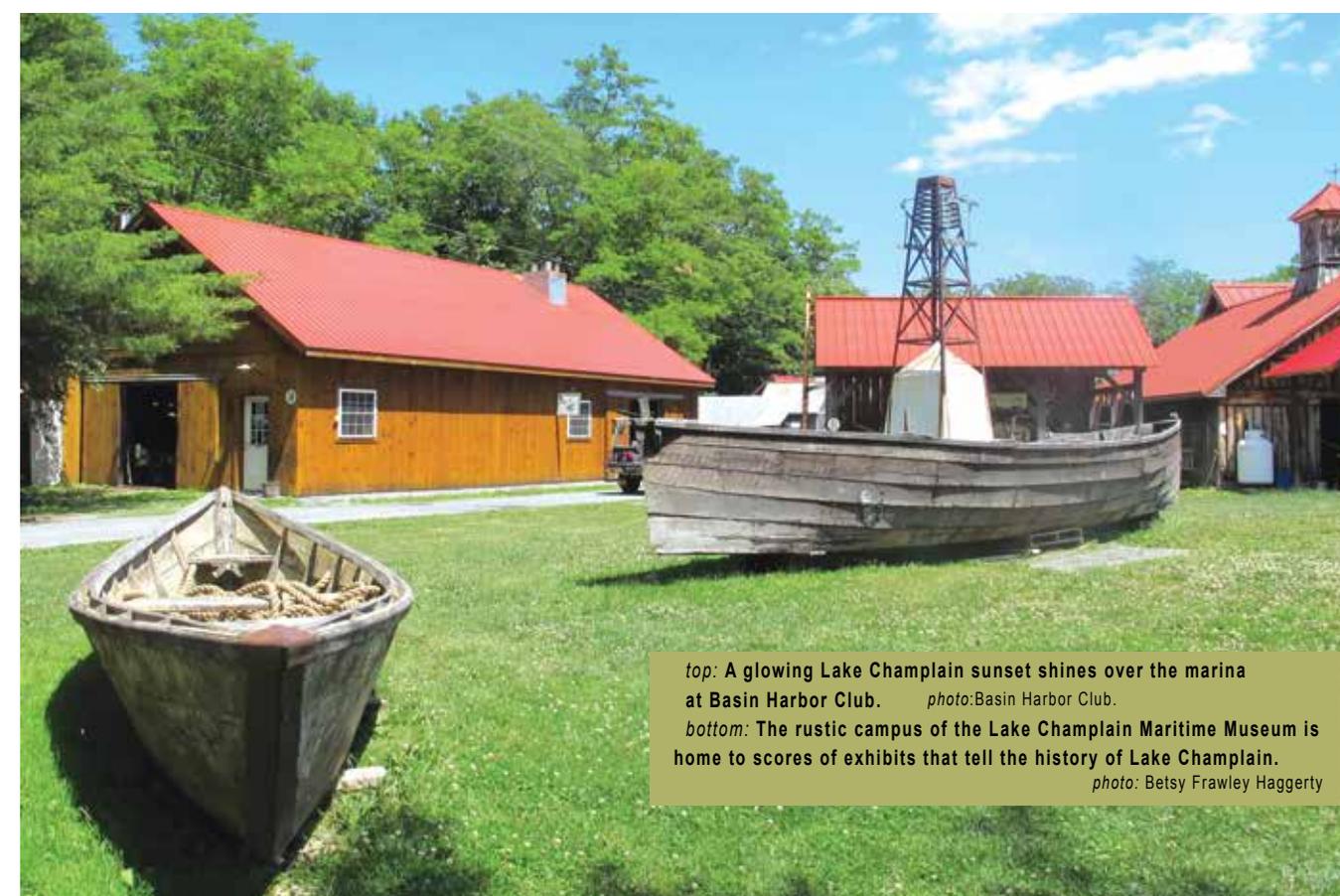
hands made that long-ago war tangible.

There's a lot more to this eclectic museum, including long boats you can row, a blacksmithing shop and courses you can take. Be sure to leave enough time to explore on your own.

### Downtown Vergennes

While the museum and Basin Harbor Club are right on the lake, downtown Vergennes, which is named for a French count who supported the American Revolution, is seven miles inland via Otter Creek, a winding rural waterway where osprey and bald eagles nest. Though narrow, the creek carries a seven-foot depth to the municipal docks in Otter Creek Basin near the waterfalls at the center of town. When I stopped last summer, two sailboats flying Canadian flags were tied up at floating park-side docks. Town officials say between 700 and 900 recreational boats visit each year.

In the 19th century the basin was a hub of industry, with sawmills, gristmills, ironworks and shipyards. A large dockside poster tells the stories of Thomas Macdonough who built nine ships there that helped Americans defeat the British in the War of 1812; Jahaziel Sherman who built and ran steamships for the Lake Champlain Steamboat Company, and the Daniels family that ran another steamship line from the basin. "Philomene Daniels," the sign says, "became the first female steamboat pilot in the world; Captain "Phil" was famous for her piloting skills,



top: A glowing Lake Champlain sunset shines over the marina at Basin Harbor Club. photo: Basin Harbor Club.  
bottom: The rustic campus of the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum is home to scores of exhibits that tell the history of Lake Champlain. photo: Betsy Frawley Haggerty

her no-nonsense attitude and her elegant dresses and hats." This summer the maritime museum has a special exhibit about Sherman and the steamboats he built and ran. Divers can explore one of Sherman's vessels, the Phoenix, which burned and sank in 1819, through the Vermont Underwater Historic Preserves program.

Most everything boaters need to know about goings-on in Vergennes is posted on the large bulletin board beside the docks—chicken and biscuit supper at the Methodist church Saturday night, farmers market on Thursdays, book sale at the library Saturday mornings, music performances at the Hired Hand Brewing Co. Cards and flyers from restaurants, specialty shops, pharmacies, a grocery, liquor store, Laundromat, a local babysitter and a taxi service provide practical information.

Main Street, the heart of historic Vergennes, is a short walk

stage curtain and mix of musical and theatrical programs, is said to have been a catalyst for a downtown revival.

The vibrant downtown, which extends just over three blocks, is filled with all kinds of enticing temptations. I fell in love with a few items at Malabar, a "carefully curated" home goods store, run by a sailing family and named for a John Alden-designed schooner. Some of the handcrafted jewelry at Raintree went on the wish list for when I win the lottery, but the big surprise was the number of eateries packed into this tiny downtown. I counted nine. This being Vermont, the restaurants all tout fresh farm-to-table food, and two have become foodie destinations. Vermont friends told me they happily travel 60 miles to dine at the Black Sheep Bistro, a small handsome restaurant that serves French-inspired gourmet food. The Vergennes Laundry by CK, so named because it is located in a former Laundromat, got its start as a



Dugout canoes, rowboats and iceboats fill the Hazelett Small Watercraft Center at Lake Champlain Maritime Museum.

photo: Lake Champlain Maritime Museum

from the city docks. There you will find well-kept 19th century buildings in a mix of Italianate, Greek revival and Victorian styles, many on the National Register of Historic Places. Two—the Bixby Memorial Library and the Vergennes Opera House—are especially noteworthy. The 100-year-old library, built of yellow brick with limestone columns, has a marble interior with a grand staircase and a spectacular stained-glass dome high above a rotunda. Besides an extensive book collection, it is home to a small museum with Vermont artifacts, and, nodding to the 21st century, it has several computers and free wifi—a boon for visiting boaters.

The red brick Vergennes Opera House/City Hall is the city's cultural and civic hub, with an unusual upstairs/downstairs configuration—a theater on the second floor and city offices on the first. Built in 1897, and restored and reopened in 1997, the opera house, known for its fine acoustics, hand-painted canvas

bakery with a wood-burning oven. Last year award-winning chef Christian Kruse, the CK in the name, became an owner and added a seafood-themed dinner menu.

Alas, it was midafternoon when we visited, and Bistro and Laundry did not open for dinner until 5 p.m., so we focused on sweet snacks and debated handcrafted chocolate confections at the Daily Chocolate vs. artisanal unusually flavored ice cream at lu.lu's vs. traditional Vermont-made Wilcox ice cream at the Main Scoop. The Scoop won out. I thoroughly enjoyed my black raspberry cone, but I wonder what I missed out on. Another visit to Vergennes is in my future.

*Award-winning maritime journalist Betsy Frawley Haggerty is a former columnist for this magazine, the former editor of Offshore Magazine and a Coast Guard licensed captain who teaches sailing on the Hudson River and Long Island Sound.*

## Vergennes at a Glance

### Getting There

- Downtown Vergennes is seven miles southeast of Lake Champlain via Otter Creek. The creek joins Lake Champlain just south of Cassin Point (44°13' 37.2" N; 73°19' 29.5" W). Mind your chart carefully as there are shallow spots near the entrance.
- Basin Harbor (44°11' 46.3"N; 73°21'50.2"W) is four nautical miles to the south of Cassin Point with a wide easy entrance from the lake.

### Dockage, Moorings & Anchorages

#### Vergennes Municipal Docks

- (802) 877-2841; vergennes.org/government/municipal-docks/
- Free dockage for up to 48 hours, includes water and power. No other services.
- Boaters can also anchor in Otter Creek Basin just beyond the docks.

#### Basin Harbor Boat Club

- (802) 475-7891; basinharbor.com
- Marina with 66 slips, and a dozen transient moorings. Slips are \$3.75 per foot/night, plus a daily \$20 per person resort fee, with a \$100 per boat maximum. Moorings are \$25 per night. Short daytime tie-ups are free. Showers, restaurants and laundry services are on site. No fuel or pumpout available. The nearest locations are Point Bay Marina (802) 425-2431 in Charlotte, VT, and Westport Marina (518) 962-4356 in Westport, NY.

### Places to Eat

#### Ardelia's and the Red Mill

- (802) 475-2311; basinharbor.com
- Resort dining, open to the public.

#### Bar Antidote

- (802) 877-2555; barantidote.com
- Farm to table comfort food, creative cocktails and local craft beer. Live music most Wednesdays.

#### Black Sheep Bistro

- (802) 877-9991; blacksheepbistrovt.com
- A destination restaurant serving French food with a Vermont twist.

#### Daily Chocolate

- (802) 877-0087; dailychocolate.net
- Chocolate candy made on site with local organic ingredients.

#### Hired Hand Brewing Company

- (802) 870-7191; hiredhandbrewing.com
- Local craft beers, spirits, specialty pizzas and small plates.

#### lu.lu

- (802) 777-3933; luluvt.com
- Small batch "farm to spoon" ice cream.

#### The Main Scoop

- (802) 458-5789
- Local favorite for Vermont cremees (a.k.a. soft-serve ice cream), hard ice cream and frozen yogurt.

#### Park Squeeze

- (802) 877-9962; parksqueeze.com
- Cozy neighborhood bar and eatery specializing in burgers, flatbreads and salads.

#### 3 Squares Café

- (802) 877-2722; threesquarescafe.com
- A local favorite since 2007 serving casual, creative cuisine for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

#### Vergennes Laundry by BK

- (802) 879-7157; vergenneslaundry.net
- Wood-fired baked goods and gourmet dinners.

### Cool Shops

#### Everywear for Everybody

- (802) 877-6811; everywearforeverybody.com
- Everything from casual clothes to evening wear for women and men.

#### Malabar

- (802) 870-7035; malabarshop.com
- Tableware, gift items, toys, bags and bling.

#### Raintree

- (802) 430-4825; raintreevt.com
- High-end, creatively designed handcrafted jewelry.

#### Stone Block Art and Antiques

- (802) 989-1158; stoneblockartandantiques.com
- Antiques store and gallery with art, furniture, jewelry and more.

### Places to Visit

#### Downtown Vergennes

- vergennesdowntown.org
- Excellent website with links to events, attractions and businesses.

#### Lake Champlain Maritime Museum

- (802) 475-2022; lcmm.org
- Open seven days a week late May through mid October; admission \$14 for adults, \$12 for seniors, \$8 for students, children under five, free. Dogs welcome.

#### Vermont Underwater Historic Preserves

- lcmm.org/explore/vermont-underwater-historic-preserves/
- Nine Lake Champlain shipwrecks, marked by large yellow buoys and open to divers at no cost. Information and registration through the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum.

#### Bixby Memorial Library

- (802) 877-2211; bixbylibrary.org
- Free public library, open Monday through Saturday

#### Vergennes Opera House

- (802) 877-6737; vergennesoperahouse.org
- Historic venue for concerts, theater and film.