

## BECOMING A “VERMONTER”

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How long does it take before it's OK to call yourself a “Vermonters”? I am not from here. Not only that, I had always described myself as a “city girl”, born in Manhattan, lived most of my adult life in or near Boston (except for a 5-year stint in Europe) and never owned a car. When I informed my friends and colleagues that my big plan was to retire to Vermont, there was a universal outcry and questions regarding my survival: “How can you live THERE? You don't drive, you don't even have a license, you don't ski, AND you hate camping!”

Well, I had my reasons. I focused on Burlington. By Vermont standards, it is a city, and I found its culture and politics very similar to Cambridge, Massachusetts where I was living. Cambridge had Harvard and MIT, but Burlington had UVM, Saint Michaels, Champlain College, and Burlington College. It also had the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts, and the Burlington City Arts Center on Church Street, which reminded me so much of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art when it was housed in a converted firehouse on Boylston Street. Those were the days before they occupied their daringly contemporary building that hangs precariously over Boston Harbor.

Burlington was practically a sister city to Montreal, and that is where my daughter and grandchildren live. Another goal on my checklist was to move closer to them. They are bilingual, and Burlington makes an effort to make French speakers feel at home. In the summer, most of the license plates at the North Beach Campground are from Quebec, and when you sit on the dock, sipping a glass of wine at Splash, the sailboats and cruisers that pull up usually claim Quebec as their homeport.

Then there is simply the breathtaking beauty of this state. In years past, I took the bus from Boston, and headed north, sometimes to attend the Vermont International Film Festival. (I was in the documentary film distribution business.) I sat by the window mesmerized as lush green mountains gave way to soft valleys dotted with cows and white steeples. I imagined myself living here. The sky was an ever changing dramatic backdrop to my thoughts as the bus lumbered along, season after season. I love the cold. The stark outline of a bare-limbed Maple against the snow stirs my aesthetic sensibilities as much as the first daffodils in spring. Burlington is Vermont's glittery tiara that perches gingerly on the shore of Lake Champlain. With the Church Street Marketplace lit and glowing in winter and its jewel of a bike path drawing locals and visitors alike year round, I felt at home before I even lived here.

Given that the last few years were difficult for anyone selling a home, I figured I could get something of comparable size to my house in Cambridge, for half the price. With the help of some solicitous Burlington-based realtors, I found what has proven to be the place I am proud to call home. An 1880's carriage house, set back from the road, surrounded

by a white picket fence. There is an ample yard for a gardener who has only known clay pots set on concrete, and for this non-driver, the piece de resistance was the bus stop at the end of my driveway and the Hannaford's shopping center a fifteen-minute walk away.

On June 17th, 2016, I will be celebrating my fifth year as a homeowner in Vermont. To those who were born here, I am just an interloper. But, I am surrounded by neighbors who welcomed me from the start. I've become close friends with the Albanian family next door, who brought a chair for me so we could sit together on North Beach and watch the city fireworks on my first 4th of July, or another neighbor who told me about signing up for [Front Porch Forum](#). The grassroots political engagement of Vermonters is legendary, and I was pleased to discover the excitement surrounding the campaign of our now new Mayor Miro Weinberger. I started volunteering, working for his election when I first came to town. It was an eye-opener, and I learned a lot about the political history of the city and the state as a result. Bernie Sanders, a homegrown Vermont native, lives a few blocks from me in a modest colonial and could be the next President of the United States.

I regularly walk with my constant companion, a 100 pound St. Bernard/Golden Retriever rescue pup named Ethel, from my house to the bike path and on down to the shore of Lake Champlain. The water is still lapping at its banks, but last year at this time you could walk across the deeply frozen expanse to New York and the Adirondacks on the other side. In the summer, the lake is always warm enough for my granddaughters who never tire of swimming at Leddy Beach, or interacting with the science exhibits at the ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center. I know they are happy grandma moved to Vermont. I feel like a "Vermonters", and I don't plan on leaving, so perhaps it is safe to now call myself one.

While this former city girl has been seduced and transformed by a place of extraordinary and ever-changing natural beauty, I am not blind to the evidence of poverty, recent increases in drug-related crime, and homelessness that also exist, often in the shadows cast by the states magnificent mountain peaks. In the frenetic, people packed cities where I have lived and worked; troubled, beleaguered citizens clinging to the ragged remains of civility became invisible while in plain sight. In Vermont, I found a pervasive feeling of community responsibility, woven into a strong social safety net, supported by trust. Burlington City Hall is a concrete example; its doors are unlocked and unfortified. There are no metal detectors or security guards demanding that you empty the contents of your purse or leave your backpack outside before entering. The bathrooms are on the ground level and are open to the public all day. When in town shopping I frequently duck in there to pee, sometimes with my dog in tow. I also bring her into City Hall when I renew her dog license. It's in the same office where you register to vote and they always offer dog biscuits to let you know that your canine friends are welcome. This openness and accessibility may seem naïve to an outsider, like a throwback to an earlier time and place. But in the face of so much rancor and ugliness thrust on us every day in so many parts of our country and the world beyond, Vermont offers respite. For a restless baby boomer like me, it is an ideal place to settle and reflect on, and write about the past, while enjoying the present and looking forward to the future.

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