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public TV and radio in the United States

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States  
Current LLC,  
Takoma Park, Md.  
301-270-7240  
E-mail:  
[web@current.org](mailto:web@current.org)



The Plattsburgh station's animated bio of Champlain will open with the French explorer at a low point in his life-wet with rain, lost in the woods after defeats in the war with the Iroquois. (Image courtesy of Mountain Lake PBS.)

# This explorer bio may be a cartoon, but not a simple-minded one

Originally published in *Current*, March 16, 2009  
By [Steve Behrens](#)

Frank Christopher finds himself with an unusual assignment. The experienced documentary-maker produced *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*, which aired on *Independent Lens* early in the decade, and the four-part *Remaking American Medicine* for public TV in 2006.

Now he's writing, directing and producing a bio of French explorer Samuel de Champlain — *Dead Reckoning: Champlain in America* — to be animated in 3D.

Christopher, working at Mountain Lake PBS in Plattsburgh, N.Y., along with colleagues at Artifex Animation Studio in Montreal, are aiming to complete the project by October. Funding for the project comes from this year's quadricentennial celebration of Champlain's discovery of the big lake that now adjoins Plattsburgh.

The budget benefits from Canadian policies that make it financially attractive to work with studios north of the border, but the choice of subject isn't getting the producers any extra Canadian support even though Champlain is the guy who discovered Quebec in 1608. The Canadians celebrated that quadricentennial *last* year.

Christopher expects that the animation will attract young viewers. Moreover, it enabled him to visualize a Native American parable that figured in Champlain's life. And it solved many problems with live-action reenactments, including battle scenes. Artifex, headed by Marc Hall, who is directing the program, came up with a computer-animation style that's more painterly than super-realistic, Christopher says. The animators will even animate the interviews with historian talking heads, deriving rotoscopic images from video.

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## LINKS

Geo quiz: What enormous lake [named for a French explorer](#) is the site of Plattsburgh, N.Y., home of what public TV station?

Press release about the [Champlain series](#).

[Artifex Animation Studios](#) in Montreal also did those obscure drug commercials with an Abe Lincoln figure playing cards with a beaver. What was that about!?

Local historical site publishes [this history of Champlain's adventure](#) on its website.

Champlain was fighting the Iroquois nation, but he was not entirely a standard-issue European conqueror. The French warred with the Iroquois, because they were enemies of the Algonquin tribes, their trading partners. He was repelled by how the Spanish treated natives in the Caribbean, according to Christopher.

Giving up the search for the passage to Asia that many explorers sought, Champlain devoted himself to settling Quebec, advocating harmony and intermarriage with natives.

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**This story has been corrected. The film will be done by October, not July as stated in the print edition.**

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