

One of the anchors of the town is the historic Brandon Inn, established in 1786 and located opposite the town green and bandstand.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BRANDON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE





Story by Maria Buteux Reade
Photos by *Vermont Magazine* staff

VERMONT TOWNS

Brandon: A Town of Music, Art, and Volunteers

Some people find Brandon; sometimes Brandon finds you!

BRANDON, VERMONT IS INFUSED WITH AN impressive spirit of volunteerism. This classic New England town has a central green in the midst of shops and stately historical homes on wide roads that radiate outward. “We’re a working-class town with a population of 3,800,” said Bernie Carr, executive director of the Chamber of Commerce. “People step up to participate in local government, recreation, schools, chamber activities, the fire department. If we don’t do it, who will?”

Route 7 bends its way through the heart of Brandon; the Neshobe River rushes under the Leary Building and Route 7 at the north end. That river raged strong enough during Tropical Storm Irene to lift the House of Pizza off its foundation and deposit it across the street. Like other Vermont towns affected by the August 2011 storm, Brandon pulled itself together and moved forward. “We take great pride in our town, be it repairing damage from Irene or coming together to cheer on our sports teams,” Bernie explained. “People in Brandon really support each other and our local businesses.” The business is a family affair, employing Bernie’s sister Carol LaBrecque and nephew Ryan Stanley. “My 89-year-old mother, Yvonne, still comes in every day just to make sure we’re doing things right,” he said with a grin. Terrie Patch is also a steadfast member of the team.

Brandon offers an array of eating options, from Mae’s Diner to the Common Ground Restaurant and Bar. Brandon resident Erynn Doaner owns both. Brandon House of Pizza and the Vermont Soup and Sandwich Shop are also popular. Chef

Robert Barral and his partner Line Barral have brought Mediterranean flavor with three spots appreciated by locals and travelers alike: Café Provence, which serves French-infused cuisine with a casual touch, made with locally sourced ingredients. Its Gourmet Provence Bakery and Wine Shop is known for rich quiche, hearty soups, paninis and wraps, and decadent cakes and pastries. Line stocks the shop with French mustards, olive oils, pâtés, wines, and cheeses to satisfy any Francophile gourmand. Less than two miles from the town green and adjacent to the golf course, the Foley family runs the Inn at Neshobe River, the Neshobe River Winery, and Foley Brothers Brewing. The



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The iconic Brandon Town Hall, which dates from 1861, was closed in 1979 but reopened in 2006 to serve as a community center; it hosts many events such as lectures, dances, plays, and concerts, and also this year’s popular silent film series.



The fiberglass, hand-decorated pigs, a 2003 fundraising project of the Brandon Artists Guild, inspired many similar decorative projects in Vermont.



The town's green is a pleasant place to sit and enjoy a summertime concert, or just to while away an hour or two on a sunny afternoon.



This building is the birthplace of Stephen A. Douglas, as well as a visitor center, and houses a museum with exhibitions highlighting the town's history in industry, tourism, and business.

tasting room is open from Wednesday to Sunday for sampling some of the family's award-winning wines and beers crafted on site.

Jack McKernon and Kevin Birchmore of the McKernon Group breathed new life into the town in the early 2000s by renovating the dilapidated shell of the building that now houses Café Provence. The facelift rejuvenated the business district and in 2002, Nancy and Jim Leary joined the movement, purchasing the Conant Block, now the Leary Building, and renovated it completely. Nancy explained, "So many people, such as the [Warren] Kimbles and Virginia Russell, got involved and invested their time, ideas, and talents. We decided to buy this building, fix it up, and get the lights on at night! This influx of the arts has brought really good energy in town in the last 15 years."

Folk artist Warren Kimble and a dozen local artists developed the Brandon Artists Guild in 1999. The group's first project in 2003, 40 five-foot-long, fiberglass pigs decorated by artists, schoolchildren, and townspeople generated enthusiasm and goodwill. The vibrant pigs were auctioned off and the proceeds allowed the Guild to purchase and renovate its current home adjacent to Café Provence. Brandon also boasts world-class music. Passionate music lovers Edna and Stephen Sutton started the Divine Art Recordings Group in 1993, an international classical recording company with 420 CDs under their label and still growing. That effort linked up with NewEnglandClassical.com, founded by Gale Parmelee, an Internet station that streams recordings from the Divine Art collection along with other top classical music labels. In 2008, the Suttons established Brandon Music as a venue for renowned musicians that cover all tastes: classical, jazz, bluegrass, folk, and country. This 50-seat hall, with phenomenal acoustics and a welcoming atmosphere, hosts concerts nearly every Saturday evening. Guests can make it a full evening out, starting with dinner at 6:00 in the Music Café.

The Suttons then launched the Compass Music and Arts Center in 2013 in Park Village, a mixed-use facility, in a building that had sat empty for 20 years before being renovated. At its heart are a 250-seat performance hall and several

music and art studios, lesson rooms, and art galleries. Visitors also can refuel at Heart and Soul Café, and if you are interested in the history of recorded music, stop by the Phonograph Rooms, a permanent exhibition of vintage home entertainment devices from 1890 to the 1970s. The Center also has a bookstore, shops, and even a farmers' market! "People stop by to pick up [groceries], and it's all on an honor system," explained Edna.

Hands-on Music, another treasure, is a community music studio dedicated to people who may (or may never have played) music. "We try to create a non-intimidating, welcoming, meaningful atmosphere in which people can have fun. Our motto is come and play," says owner Rob Zollman. A lifelong drummer, percussionist, performer, and educator, Rob offers instrumental and voice instruction. He also provides opportunities to create music with at-risk youth, wellness and recovery programs, senior centers, and schools across the state. "The store is the tip of the iceberg of our offerings," he noted.

The town's 22nd annual Basin Bluegrass Festival runs from July 7 to 10. Peo-

ple picnic, camp out, and enjoy top-quality bluegrass bands. "Music in the Park," a summer concert series, expanded this summer to eight concerts in July and August. The concerts are free and held on the village green or across the road in the town hall in case of rain. Local nonprofit organizations grill burgers, hot dogs, and chicken for their fundraisers. The Brandon Inn, crown jewel of the town, sits across from the green. Established in 1786, this four-story, red brick inn with spacious porches cries out for lingering

in a deep chair with a glass of something cool. The inn is a popular choice for weddings, reunions, and business retreats. Families visiting local colleges often book rooms here, as do weary pedalers on bicycle tours through the Green Mountains. Sarah and Louis Pattis, owners of the inn since 1988, provide meeting space for local nonprofit groups and graciously host fundraisers for the town.

"In a town our size, we all wear multiple hats to survive," said Bill Moore who serves as the town's economic de-

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Brandon is visited now and then by antique car clubs, and has been a destination point for vacationers since well before the time this spiffy-looking Packard hit the road.



A sunny morning on Park Street with the mailman making his rounds, an image that hasn't changed much in Brandon since Norman Rockwell's time.



"We loved that Brandon is a quintessential functioning town where you can get pretty much everything you need on foot," observes Kevin Thornton, board member of the Brandon Museum.

velopment officer and recreation director. "My goal is to connect people with the resources necessary to establish their business in town." He also advocates for Brandon at the county and state levels. The Town of Brandon stewards a revolving loan fund that helps start and improve businesses in town.

Creative Fiber Designs has become a mecca for fiber arts aficionados. Maria Ammatuna Clark is happy to share her passion for creative fiber crafting with neophytes and experienced pros. She and her staff offer classes several times a month, including the quilters' retreats at the inn. The Home Shop, owned by Nancy Leary, is a natural outlet for goods that complement her architectural design work: richly colored textiles, natural fiber towels, pillows and throw rugs in earthy tones, and all sorts of cabinet hardware. Hovering over the Neshobe River, Blue Moon Clothing and Gifts sells women's clothing and gifts, mostly by Fair Trade artisans. Ellen Walter moved her store down from Bristol because "there's such happy energy in this town!" Book & Leaf, an independent bookstore that opened in 2014, offers an eclectic mix of books. The spacious and well-lit shop has blond bookshelves, hardwood floors, tables, and comfy chairs where you can peruse a novel or enjoy a pastry and a mug of tea or coffee.

Specializing in hardwood furniture for dormitories, the military, schools, libraries, and other institutions, New England Woodcraft began in 1960 in Harmon Thurston's garage. It is Brandon's largest employer. "My wife, Maxine, was pregnant and wanted a footstool so she could rest her feet. We couldn't find one in the style she wanted so I made her one." A footstool here, a bench there led to a small business that Harmon started in his garage converted to a workshop. He employs 140 people, many of whom have been there from the start. "We ship all over the world; 60 to 70 tractor trailers leave our docks each week," Harmon said, finishes.

Brandon's 4th of July parade is often billed as the biggest Independence Day parade in Vermont and its Memorial Day parade features local first graders in white dresses, carrying flowers to the war monument on the green—the longest continuously running Memorial Day ceremony of that type in the country, started



Ellen Walter (above) says she moved her store, Blue Moon Clothing and Gifts, to Brandon from Bristol "because there's such happy energy in this town." And townspeople are happy that Book & Leaf, an independent bookstore where Tricia Black (below) is manager, has come to town.



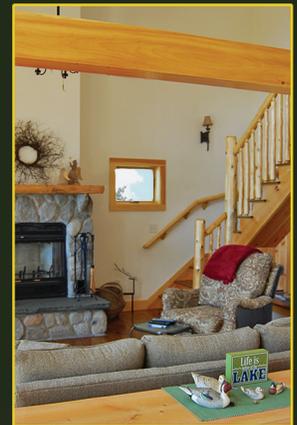
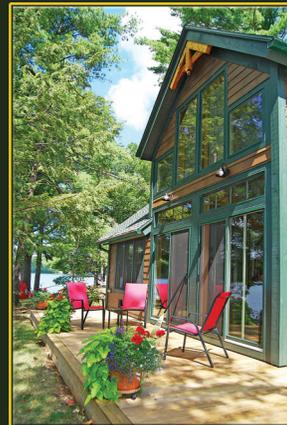
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Just down the street from Cafe Provence and two other eating establishments (Mae's Diner and Common Ground Restaurant & Bar) is its amazing bakery and wine shop, Gourmet Provence, housed in this tidy brick building that is home to several businesses.



Inside, Gourmet Provence has a mind-boggling selection of wines, patés, cheeses, and mustards, and there is usually quite a happy gathering at the counter as folks line up to order all sorts of quiche, soups, paninis, wraps, cakes, and pastries.

in the late 1800s following the Civil War. The Brandon Museum at the Stephen A. Douglas Birthplace, located on the north side, is free and serves as the town's visitor center. One room is dedicated to local history and the other reveals why the town didn't vote for their native son when he ran for president in 1860. "Brandon was a hotbed of abolition from 1830s on," said Kevin Thornton, on the museum's board of directors, "and even though Douglas came home to campaign, people threw a big party, politely shook his hand ... and then voted for Lincoln."

Kevin has made a documentary, *Death in the Wilderness: A Love Story*, an engaging tale of a gutsy young Civil War widow. The film is based on a letter he found in the town library's attic. "The movie is a valentine to the town and people of Brandon," said Kevin. The film premiered in late May and will be screened throughout the summer. Kevin and his wife moved to Brandon from Chittenden County in 2000. "We loved that Brandon is a quintessential functioning town where you can get pretty much everything you need on foot: milk, hardware, flowers, post office, great restaurants. We also were captivated by the architecture."

Nancy Leary summed up Brandon's essence: "The town is small enough that it takes me a long time to finish my grocery shopping because I see everyone I know, but big enough so that I'm always meeting new people." Bill Moore added, "Brandon has a high quality of life, and I guess we all are its cheerleaders!" Or as Rob Zollman said, "Some people find Brandon. Sometimes Brandon finds you." 🍷

Maria Buteux Reade has a home along the Battenkill River in Arlington, VT. After 27 years teaching English, she now balances freelance writing with work at Someday Farm in East Dorset.

JUST THE FACTS

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For more information call 802-247-6401 or visit the town's website brandon.org.

