



**Otter Valley High School partners with
Vermont Humanities Council for flood presentations**

By Sophia Buckley-Clement, Staff Writer

Feb 9, 2026

BRANDON — The Otter Valley Union High School Community Engagement Lab encouraged community conversations about flood resiliency last week, thanks to a partnership with the Vermont Humanities Council.

The school held the second of two free lecture events on Feb. 4 for community members interested in learning about flooding in Vermont and how the development of settlement patterns over time has contributed to flooding issues.

Titled “River Memories: Exploring Settlement Patterns on Waterways in Vermont”, the Feb. 4 presentation was led by historian Alan Berolzheimer, managing editor for the Vermont Historical Society.

OVUHS educator and Foothills Program lead Nicole Vachon-Hanlon said the events were part of a larger initiative to incorporate the Vermont Humanities Council’s Vermont Reads program into her curriculum.

“Last year, we did Vermont Reads ... and I had taught it as a cross-curricular teacher. I utilize English, social studies and everything together. So, (Vermont Reads) worked pretty well for me,” Vachon-Hanlon said. “We were working to try and find something that would really connect our students, our teachers and our community, because there are lots of opportunities.”

This year’s Vermont Reads book is the climate fiction novel “The Light Pirate” by Lily Brooks-Dalton, which tells the story of a girl named Wanda growing up in a near-future Florida where rising sea levels and extreme weather events are reshaping the land.

Vachon-Hanlon said she was able to secure a grant through Vermont Humanities to fund the purchase of 100 copies of “The Light Pirate”, as well as the two presentations.

The first presentation, held on Jan. 7, saw Shawna Trader, of Barre Up!, discuss how community-building efforts across the state are building resilience both during and outside of flooding events.

Both presentations were made available to students during the school day, as well as to other community members in the afternoon.

Vachon-Hanlon said that some of the projects incorporated into her teaching of “The Light Pirate” have included collaborating with the school’s art teachers to have multiple classes create art inspired by the book and the environment.

The art pieces, which were showcased during the presentations, included works made of recycled materials, landscape paintings and drawings on vinyl records.

“Our whole theme of this (Vermont Reads) project and all the different things we did was: how do we help our community not just survive, but thrive?” Vachon-Hanlon said. “We participated in SolarFest. We started making kindness rocks. We did a raft race.”

Vachon-Hanlon said she was even able to connect with the music department to have them incorporate some songs about nature and resilience in their repertoire.

During the Feb. 4 presentation, Berolzheimer told guests that the answer to the question of why Vermont towns are vulnerable to flooding is, in large part, due to the state’s topography.

“You add that topography to severe rain events, and it’s a recipe for rivers to overflow their banks,” he said. “There are two stories I’m going to tell. One is about changing settlement patterns from early years through the 19th century, and the other is about deforestation.”

Berolzheimer said population growth, the build-up of industrial facilities on waterways and deforestation played a significant role in reshaping Vermont’s water sources.

“The state is beginning to undertake statewide flood mitigation planning that’s going to be a long and arduous process, and some towns are starting to grapple with it at the local level, too,” Berolzheimer said.

Vachon-Hanlon said after the event that she was pleased with the community turnout, adding that she hopes the event inspires continued conversation about flood resiliency.

“One of our goals with Otter Valley is to be a hub for opportunity — a place where, if there are hard times, (people) can come here and have resources and connectivity,” Vachon-Hanlon said.

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