

Course on Finnish language offered in West Paris

By Leslie H. Dixon, Staff Writer

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The headquarters of the Finnish-American Heritage Society of Maine on Maple Street in West Paris features numerous photos, artifacts, a library and gift shop.

– Courtesy of the Finnish American Heritage Society of Maine



The headquarters of the Finnish American Heritage Society of Maine on Maple Street in West Paris has a room with a large number of displays and artifacts.

– Courtesy of the Finnish American Heritage Society of Maine

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WEST PARIS — Western Maine University and Community College Center in Paris will offer a Finnish language course in January to boost Finnish-Americans' ability to speak their native language.

To assist residents who wish to learn more about the upcoming course, the Finnish-American Heritage Society of Maine will give a presentation at the organization's meeting Sunday, Oct. 16, at its headquarters. Curt Madison of the UMaine System and Abbott will join Marja-Leena Bailey to discuss the course. The meeting is open to the public.

The course is a partnership between University College in Saco, which is part of the University of Maine System, and Middlesex Community College in Massachusetts, center director Nikki Abbott said.

The intensive beginners' course will use a combination of interactive video/computer conferencing, face-to-face teaching, and online engagement with teacher Marja-Leena Bailey, chairwoman of the Foreign Languages Department at Middlesex Community College.

Many Finnish immigrants who came to Western Maine in the 19th century after famine hit their country settled in Oxford County, working in the woods and lumber camps. Although many Finnish families remain in the area, college officials say the younger generations continue to lose their ability to speak and use their ancestral language.

“There are very few Finnish-descent residents who speak the language,” said Dale Piirainen of the Finnish-American Heritage Society of Maine, which is headquartered at 8 Maple St. in West Paris. “They are, with very few exceptions, children of the original immigrants and grew up in a home where the language was spoken by both parents.”

At least 400 Finns immigrated to the area between 1890 and 1914, Piirainen said. The West Paris resident and former chairman of the Oxford Hills School District Board of Directors said it is unclear how many persons of Finnish descent still live in the area, but four generations have been born in the past 100 years, so the indications are there could be a large number.

While Piirainen said there is probably no more need to have a Finnish language course

than any other, he believes there is probably high interest in such a program. "I hope that it encourages folks to take a closer look at their heritage," he said.

The Finnish-American Heritage Society of Maine was formed in 1982 as a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving Finnish heritage, celebrating Finnish culture and educating the community about Finnish customs.

The active organization, headquartered on Main Street in West Paris, holds regular meetings, fundraising events such as a potluck supper at 5 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 15, public performances of dance and song, and programs on Finnish history.

Additionally, the headquarters houses a room dedicated to research and immigrant history, a room for displays and artifacts and a room for archival storage. It also has a library and gift shop where a large variety of Finnish-American items are sold, including a 2012 calendar.

More information about the Finnish-American Heritage Society of Maine is available at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Finnish-American-Heritage-Society-of-Maine/102927279335>, or at <http://www.mainefinns.org>.

For more information about the Finnish language course, contact Abbott at 1-888-677-3377.

Western Maine University and Community College Center is at 232 Main St. in Paris.

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