The Welland Canals Foundation, Honourable William Hamilton Merritt and the St. Catharines Historical Society and Museum

RG 75-11

Brock University Archives


Extent: 1.3716m (4 boxes) textual material
1 folio (newspapers)
1 cassette tape
39 photographs, 4 negatives
1 pin
2 coins (dollar)

Abstract: This archive contains materials relating to the Welland Canals Foundation, Honourable William Hamilton Merritt and the St. Catharines Historical Society and Museum. The bulk of the materials are correspondence, meeting minutes and media releases. The materials have been kept in original order, except where noted. The title reflects the organization and designation used by the donor.

Materials: Typed and handwritten correspondence, reports, media releases, clippings, photographs.

Repository: Brock University Archives

Processed by: Jen Goul

Last updated: November 2006

Terms of Use: The Welland Canals Foundation, Honourable William Hamilton Merritt and the St. Catharines Historical Society and Museum fonds is open for research.

Use Restrictions: Current copyright applies. In some instances, researchers must obtain the written permission of the holder(s) of copyright and the Brock University Archives before publishing quotations from materials in the collection. Most papers may be copied in accordance with the Library's usual procedures unless otherwise specified.

Acquisition Info.: This collection is part of the Ontario Editorial Bureau fonds, donated by Lou Cahill in November 1997.

History:

‘The Father of Canadian Transportation’ is a term commonly associated with William Hamilton Merritt. Although he is most known for being one of the driving forces behind the building of the first Welland Canal, he was many things throughout his life; a soldier, merchant, promoter, entrepreneur and politician to name a few. Born on July 3, 1793 at Bedford, Westchester County, N.Y. to Thomas Merritt and Mary Hamilton, Merritt’s family relocated to Canada shortly after in 1796. The move came after Merritt’s father petitioned John Graves Simcoe for land in Upper Canada after serving under him in the Queen’s Rangers during the American Revolution. The family quickly settled into their life at Twelve Mile Creek in St. Catharines. Merritt’s father became sheriff of Lincoln County in 1803 while Merritt began his education in mathematics and surveying. After some brief travel and further education Merritt returned to Lincoln County, in 1809 to help farm his father’s land and open a general store.

While a farmer and merchant, Merritt turned his attention to military endeavours. A short time after being commissioned as a Lieutenant in the Lincoln militia, the War of 1812 broke out. Fulfilling his duty, Merritt fought in the Battle of Queenston Heights in October of 1812, and numerous small battles until the Battle of Lundy’s Lane in July 1814. It was here that Merritt was captured and held in Cheshire, Massachusetts until the war ended. Arriving back in the St. Catharines area upon his release, Merritt returned to being a merchant, as well as becoming a surveyor and mill owner.

Some historians hypothesize that the need to draw water to his mill was how the idea of the Welland Canals was born. Beginning with a plan to connect the Welland River with the Twelve mile creek quickly developed into a connection between the Lakes Erie and Ontario. Its main purpose was to improve the St. Lawrence transportation system and provide a convenient way to transport goods without having to go through the Niagara Falls portage. The plan was set in motion in 1818, but most living in Queenston and Niagara were not happy with it as it would drive business away from them. Along with the opposition came financial and political restraints. Despite these factors Merritt pushed on and the Welland Canal Company was chartered by the Upper Canadian Assembly on January 19, 1824. The first sod was turned on November 30, 1824 almost a year after the initial chartering. Many difficulties arose during the building of the canal including financial, physical, and geographic restrictions. Despite the difficulties two schooners passed through the canal on November 30, 1829. Throughout the next four years continual work was done on the canal as it expended and was modified to better accommodate large ships.

After his canal was underway Merritt took a more active role in the political arena, where he served in various positions throughout Upper Canada. In 1851, Merritt withdrew from the Executive Council for numerous reasons, one of which
being that public interest had diverted from the canals to railways. Merritt tried his hand at other public works outside transportation and trade. He looked into building a lunatic asylum, worked on behalf of War of 1812 veterans, aided in building Brock’s monument, established schools, aided refugee slaves from the U.S. and tried to establish a National Archives among many other feats.

He was described by some as having “policy too liberal – conceptions too vast – views too comprehensive to be comprehensible by all”, but he still made a great difference in the society in which he lived. After his great contributions, Merritt died aboard a ship in the Cornwall canal on July 5, 1862.

retrieved October 2006

Today numerous groups carry on the legacy of Merritt and the canals both in the past and present. One such group is the Welland Canals Foundation. They describe themselves as:

“. . . a volunteer organization which strives to promote the importance of the present and past Welland Canals, and to preserve their history and heritage. The Foundation began in 1980 and carries on events like William Hamilton Merritt Day. The group has strongly supported the Welland Canals Parkway initiative and numerous other activities”.

The Welland Canals Foundation does not work alone. They have help from other local groups such as the St. Catharines Historical Society. The Society’s main objective is to increase knowledge and appreciation of the historical aspects of St. Catharines and vicinity, such as the Welland Canals.


Scope and Content:
The fonds contains materials relating to the Welland Canals Foundation, the Honourable William Hamilton Merritt and the St. Catharines Historical Society and Museum from 1971 to 1990. The materials included are meeting minutes, annual reports, media releases and correspondence and some photographs, many of which are part of media releases. Due to the large nature of this collection, duplicates were removed and discarded. The bulk of the materials are from the Welland Canals Foundation. Materials have been arranged according to their original folder titles. Any folders marked “Welland Canal” refer to the “Welland Canals Foundation”. Media releases, meeting minutes and clippings were removed from the general correspondence of the Welland Canals Foundation and placed in separate folders, for easier access and research. The meeting minutes for the St. Catharines Historical Society and Museum and William Hamilton Merritt were retained within the original order as to not mix them with the Welland Canals Foundation minutes. Folders are arranged alphabetically and then chronologically within each
series. The series are arranged alphabetically. Large newspaper clippings are in folio storage, cabinet 6-5-5, their numbers correspond to the numbers listed in the finding aid.

**Organization:**

The records were arranged into three series:


Series II, Correspondence, 1971-1990


**Inventory:**


**Series II. Correspondence, 1971-1990**

1.12 Canadian Canals Society, 1982; includes by-laws of the Society.


1.28-1.31 “Mr. Merritt”: regarding the 150th anniversary of the Welland Canals Foundation, 1979


4.10-4.15 Clippings, 1973-1989


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Subject Access: 650 Commemorative postage stamps -- Canada.
650 Welland Canal (Ont.) -- History.
650 Welland Canal (Ont.) -- Anniversaries, etc.
650 Recreation -- Ontario -- Welland Canal.
650 150th Anniversary of the First Welland Canal Committee.
650 St. Catharines Historical Museum.
650 Museums -- Ontario -- St. Catharines.

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Separated Materials:
Cabinet 6-5-5, RG 75-11, folio #1

F.1 William Hamilton Merritt stamp


F.1 Port Colborne News *Remembering Yesteryear Port Colborne’s 150th Anniversary as a Lakeport*. Wednesday July 27th 1983