

## WILLIAM H. MERRITT, VISIONARY (1793-1862)

William H. Merritt was a soldier, merchant, promoter, author, and politician. Born in Bedford, New York, Merritt started out as a merchant in St. Catharines with outlets in Niagara, Queenston, and the naval station on the Grand River. He sold dry goods, groceries, hardware, crockery, and books, for which he accepted cash and country produce. In 1816 Merritt purchased a small sawmill on Twelve Mile Creek and shortly after built a gristmill there. That same year he developed a salt spring on his property, built a potashery, and erected a small distillery. With the closing of the Grand River naval station and a general depression following the war, Merritt concentrated his mercantile activities in St. Catharines. Merritt is best known for his part in the promotion of the Welland Canal, linking The Great Lakes of Ontario and Erie.



The idea likely grew out of the need for water to run his mills on Twelve Mile Creek; by constructing a feeder canal he hoped to obtain water from the Welland River and its source, Chippawa Creek, the summit of which was two miles from his mill site. His plan to build a canal to connect the Welland River with Twelve Mile Creek soon grew into a plan to link the two Great Lakes. Merritt formed the Welland Canal Company in 1824; the Canal was finally finished in 1829, bringing vessels through Twelve Mile Creek on their way to the Great Lakes and beyond. The canal would improve the St. Lawrence transportation system by providing a cheap and convenient means for the products of western Upper

Canadian farms to bypass the Niagara Falls portage and to proceed to Montreal. During the construction of the canal, along the Twelve Mile Creek he discovered an artesian well. Beginning with mineral water from a deep cavity in the earth, this water could be boiled leaving behind salt residue, a valuable commodity at the time. In later years, spa resorts such as Springbank Hotel and Stephenson House were developed to profit from the healing powers of these mineral waters. William H. Merritt is considered one of the most important historical figures in the development of the City of St. Catharines. His house still stands along the Twelve Mile Creek and there are many memorials throughout the community.

