

Thomas Merritt Sr. (1729-1820) was born in Westchester County, New York¹. In 1775, he signed a protest against the rebellion and afterwards took refuge in New York City with the British army. He arrived in Parrtown (St. John, New Brunswick) with the July fleet of 1783 on the ship Montague² with two sons^{3, p. 6}, David Daniel and Nehemiah¹. There is no evidence that the New Brunswick Merritt's participated in the War of 1812. Thomas Sr.'s oldest son, Thomas Jr. (1759-1842) also arrived in Parrtown with the Fall fleet during the evacuation of the Queen's Rangers¹.

During the American Revolution, Thomas Sr. had arranged for Thomas Jr. to join Emmerick's Chassuers⁴ as a Cornet. Thomas Jr. later transferred to the Queens' Rangers who were under the command of John Graves Simcoe⁵.

Thomas Jr. and his wife, Mary returned to the United States shortly after arriving in NB and settled for a while in New York where two children were born at Bedford^{6 p. 278}. Upon hearing that John Graves Simcoe had been appointed Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, Thomas Jr. investigated moving to the Niagara region and was granted land in 1796 near the mouth of 12 Mile Creek where present day St. Catharines, Ontario is located^{7, 3 p. 13}.

In 1798 Thomas Merritt Jr. was appointed Surveyor of the Kings Woods and in 1803 became the first Sheriff of the Niagara District⁸.

At the outbreak of the War of 1812, Thomas Merritt was appointed Major Commandant of the Niagara Light Dragoons⁹. This was a militia cavalry troop which supported infantry forces. At Queenston, his dragoons along with the Indians kept the enemy busy on the heights while General Sheaff formed his troops to the rear¹⁰. His assistance to Major General Roger Sheaffe at Queenston Heights was acknowledged by Sheaffe to General Prevost in a letter, describing the battle, dated October, 13, 1812¹¹. At the funeral of Sir Isaac Brock, Thomas Merritt was a pallbearer^{3 p. 17/29}. In Thomas Merritt's memoirs, mention is made of his daughter assisting General Brock to buckle his sword prior to leaving for Queenston Heights^{3 p. 16}. After the surrender of the Americans at Queenston, Thomas Merritt collected the swords of the US officers,^{3 p. 17} who were taken prisoner. One of these swords was donated to the Royal Canadian Military Institute in Toronto³.

After Queenston, Major Merritt retained command of the Dragoons in name only and left most of the active command to his son, William Hamilton Merritt (1793-1862). The Niagara Light Dragoons were disbanded after a year since they were a volunteer unit. The disbanding was shortly before the fall of Fort George, so did not last long. They were replaced by the Troop of Provincial Dragoons under the command of William Hamilton Merritt, who became a Captain. After the retreat of the British army to Burlington Heights from 4 Mile Creek in October 1813, Thomas Merritt remained at his house at 12 Mile Creek as he was too ill to retreat. The traitor, Joseph Willcocks took him prisoner and Thomas Merritt was transported to Fort Niagara^{12 p. 12}. His son, William Hamilton Merritt pleaded to General Harrison^{12 p. 13} at Fort George for his father's release. By mid December 1813, Thomas Merritt was released and left the area prior to the burning of Niagara, near Fort George. After the end of the War of 1812, Thomas Merritt claimed a loss of 1778£ for house, stable and barn burned near Niagara¹³. He received 752£.

In July 1814 a major trial of traitors was held at Ancaster, Upper Canada. A number were convicted and sentenced to be hung. In his position as Sherriff of Niagara, Thomas Merritt over saw the executions. This profoundly affected him, causing him to resign from the position of Sheriff in January of 1820⁸. He retired to live in St. Catharines and was one of its most popular citizens of the time^{6 p.292/3}. He was involved in the formation of St. George's Anglican Church there¹⁴.

In September 1814, Thomas Merritt, as Sheriff was directed by General Gordon Drummond¹⁵ through his secretary, Edward McMahan to identify wives and families of traitors along with traitors themselves to the authorities so land could be confiscated and the people sent out of the district to America. It is not known to what extent the order was carried out.

Thomas Merritt's concern about traitors would have been influenced by his brother, William's actions. In 1813⁹ William Merritt¹⁶ joined the enemy and fled to the United States. Thomas Merritt made a request for William's confiscated lands in 1817¹⁶. When the Dragoons were first formed, Thomas appointed his brother to be vice cornet^{9 p.1}, not cornet. William seems to have moved to Niagara about the same time as Thomas, however William is not in the Upper Canada Land Petitions but is on the 1814 map of Grantham Township, Lincoln County, Upper Canada¹⁷. (This may be William Hamilton Merritt.) Thomas describes William as doing well on his land in 1800 in a letter to his family in New Brunswick. By 1806^{6 p.286} William has sought refuge with his brother after suffering during the hard times of 1804^{6 p.289/291}.

William Merritt was indicted at a session of court held at Ancaster, District of Niagara in May 1814 for aiding the enemy and attempting to persuade loyal citizens to take oath of allegiance to the enemy. He failed to appear at the courts of general quarter sessions at Grimsby in July and October of 1815 and Niagara in January 1816¹⁸. William Merritt was listed on a Treason Poster issued in 1821¹⁵. The manuscript proclaiming the indictment of William Merritt refers to Thomas Merritt as Sheriff of Niagara but does not refer to William as a brother although it is a legal document¹⁸.

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