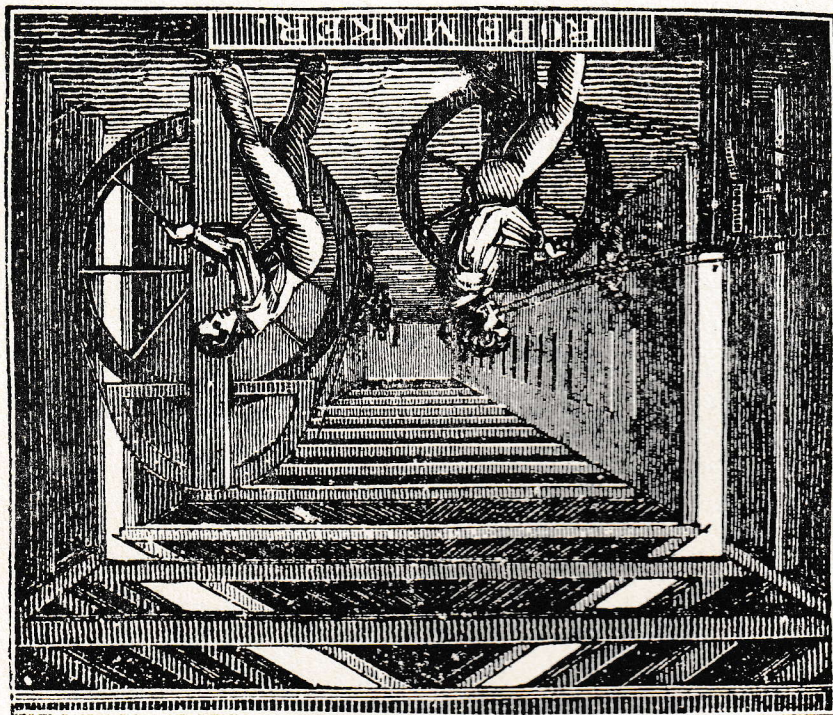


HISTORY



Courtesy Redwood Library and Athenaeum
Photo by John Hopf

ROPE MAKER

Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society

Number 149

Fall, 1973

Vol. 46, Part 4

THE ART, TRADE, OR MYSTERY OF THE ROPEMAKER

By

RICHARD L. CHAMPLIN

Anyone hearing the term ropewalk for the first time might take it to mean a conundrum in the style of the old question: "Have you ever seen a board-walk?" But to the ropemaker, ropewalks meant a livelihood, and to those who followed the sea, a matter of life and safety.

As generations of Newporters knew them, ropewalks were long buildings where the makers of cordage plied their trade. Originally open to the skies, the ropewalks came to be inclosed, wooden sheds, which, because of their inherent fire hazard, were deployed on the outskirts of town. Over the years Newport tallied as many as nine of them.¹

Reportedly, Newport's long history of ropemaking began with a Freeman, Robert Taylor in 1655.² As in other colonial ports the industry came into prominence when the rift between the colonies and the motherland widened. It survived the Revolution, peaked after that conflict, and not until 1880 was the name of Newport's last ropemaker, James Clarke, dropped from the city directory.

The raw materials of ropemaking, hemp and tar, were not easily supplied locally. Although flax and cotton also went into the manufacture of rope, hemp made the best cordage for marine use, while flax served in the manufacture of smaller cords such as those for rope beds. Strangely enough, this hemp, known botanically as *Cannabis sativa*, is identical with the plant used in making marijuana. It comes as a surprise, then, to find that the General Assembly granted a bounty to encourage the growing of hemp, but this they did in August 1722. Still later the Assembly offered a penny for every pound of hemp (or flax) proven to have been raised in the colony.³ In 1733 the colony paid out bounty on 1,589 pounds of hemp. A warden certified the source and quality of the produce. Hence among its other long-since archaic appointments, the Town Council of Newport in 1729 appointed two Hemp Viewers, namely

John Brown and Peter Coggeshall. Later, when the raising of hemp proved impractical locally, great quantities were imported from the southern colonies, Kentucky in particular, and especially from Russia.

Tar, the other essential of good rope, began to be made in this colony. Indeed a village took the name Tarklin (now in Burrillville), apparently the only place so named in the world, but the town of Providence which then included Tarklin, soon forbade the "running of tar", as they termed it, not that the pitch pine knots used were in any way scarce, but the authorities saw better uses for them in lighting of home lanterns and in the beacon towers strategically set around the colony.⁵ So it came about that the Tar Heel State, North Carolina, could and did, supply this need in years to come.

With adequate raw materials assured, then, how did the rope-maker proceed? At the front end of the ropewalk he bound around his waist thick coils of hemp called stricks. This hemp had already been combed out, or "hatched" as the rope spinner would have said. A helper, often his son, manned a wheel by its crank which he turned endlessly. The spinner secured a few strands of hemp to a hook on the wheel, the turning commenced, and the ropemaker receded into the distance as far as a quarter of a mile in some ropewalks, paying out the fibers of hemp which became a kind of yarn. Naturally, as he backed away, with the turning wheel ever at work, the yarn added to its bulk and weight. To relieve himself of the load the spinner rested the growing line on supports called "bearers." With one yarn completed and clenched against untwisting, he returned to the fore end, only to repeat the process. Once he had three such strands of equal tension and equal size, he next "laid" the rope. That is, he bound together the three lesser lines, using the same wheel to twist them in the same direction. If he went a step further and made a cable, the spinner bound three ropes together but twisted them in the opposite direction.

The tarring came into the picture just before the three strands were laid into rope. They were run through a vat of hot tar and forced through a small eye hole to remove the excess. In addition to preserving the cordage, tar reduced friction between the fibers. Tared rope was essential aboard ship.

Ropes inevitably grew shorter in the manufacture, because the twisting tended to reduce the original length. No matter what the length of the ropewalk was its final product would be shorter.

This, in brief, describes the process of making rope, at least before the use of machinery. Each ropemaker had his own special twist.⁶

Longfellow summed it up in a verse entitled *The Ropewalk*:

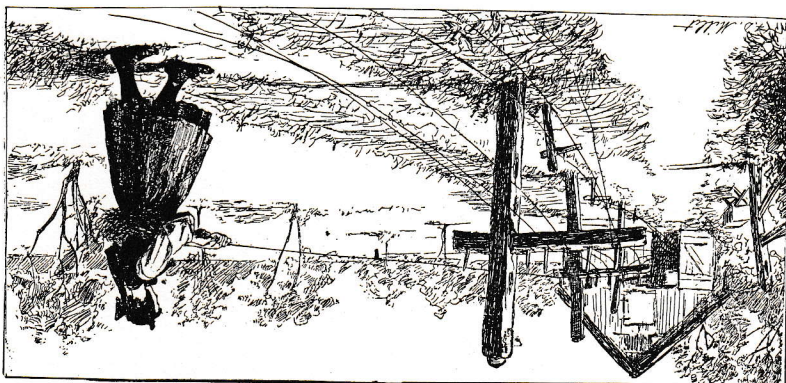
"In that building, long and low,
With its windows all a-row,
Like the port-holes of a hulk,
Human spiders spin and spin,
Backward down their threads so thin,
Dropping each a hempen bulk.
At the end, an open door;
Squares of sunshine, on the floor
Light the long and dusky lane;
And the whirling of a wheel,
Dull and drowsy, makes me feel
All its spokes are in my brain.
As the spinners to the end
Downward go and reascend. . .
All these scenes do I behold,
These and many left untold,
In that building long and low;
While the wheel goes round and round,
With a drowsy, dreamy sound,
And the spinners backward go."

Where, then, were the ropewalks in Newport?

Ezra Stiles' map of Newport, 1758, owned by Redwood Library, shows (among others) one on the east side of Farewell Street, ending approximately opposite the Liberty Tree. The names of Lewis and Peter Buloid are associated with this enterprise, and in his history of Newport, Dr. Henry Turner calls it Caswell and Buloid's Ropewalk.⁷

John Banister did business with this firm. In 1750 he recorded a debt of £ 11.16.9 owed to Peter Buloid, ropemaker, for fitting out the sloop *Little Polly*. In the same year he owed over £ 78 for refitting the vessel *Settee Eagle*.⁸ This, incidentally, marks a change in attitude on Banister's part, as that merchant had written only a decade before to Capt. Thomlinson in London ordering cordage for a new ship to be bought in England, the English cordage "being much better than what's made here."⁹ Perhaps in the intervening decade the overseas competition had improved the quality of rope made in this colony.

The fate of Buloid's enterprise remains unknown. We have Henry Bull's observation, however, that the long wooden ropewalks were pulled down during the Revolution for use as fuel, just as the island was shorn of its trees for the same reason.¹⁰ Buloid's may have suffered this fate.



Newport Historical Society

Photo by John Hopf

This delightful drawing was by Francis Davis Millet, who was born, 1846, in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts and went down on the *Titanic* in 1912. He was an author, war correspondent and illustrator. Millet studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp as well as in France and Italy. He was a member of the National Academy of Design; American Academy of Arts and Letters and was an Honorary Member of the American Institute of Architects, as well as being actively engaged in organizing and securing endowments for the American Academy of Art in Rome. He was awarded medals at exhibitions in both Paris and Chicago.

The Blaskowitz map of Newport in 1777 shows a second rope-walk on Farewell Street, also on the east side of the road, but west of the burial ground. Although no name is attached to this (or to the others shown), it seems to be the ropewalk of Henry Collins and Ebenezer Flag.¹¹ These gentlemen owned it in co-partnership, and there is evidence that William Vernon, merchant, owed Collins for cordage as early as 1738. Upon the death of Flag in 1762, the co-partnership dissolved, only to be revived by a relative of both, Flag's son, Henry Collins Flag. This ropemaker advertised in the *Newport Mercury* of November 2, 1762:

"Henry Collins Flag informs the public, that the Rope-making business continues to be carried on at the Walk lately improved by his Father, Mr. Ebenezer Flag, of Newport, deceased; where Merchants and others may be supplied with Cordage of every kind, and of the best Quality, and may have Hemp and Junk manufactured with Dispatch and Fidelity . . ."

One can only speculate about what and how many ships were fitted out with cordage from Flag. With shipbuilding coming into its own in Rhode Island, the demands could have been heavy.

Listing the ropewalks in Newport, Benjamin Howland locates one on the north side of Bowery Street, as shown on the Blaszkowitz map.¹² Howland adds that this was probably a Malbone ropewalk. The question is, which Malbone? Probably Evan Jr., but we are left without an explanation of why he hadn't inherited his father's ropewalk on Catherine Street. Perhaps his father had sold to Francis Brinley before Evan Jr. was of age. Evan Jr. left Newport during the Revolution for Long Island, where he lived to the age of 83 in 1830. Hence very likely this ropewalk did not operate after the war. Indeed, it, too, may have been razed during the cold winters of British occupation.

Barker's ropewalk commenced at Pope Street and extended south along the west side of Spring Street. It began with a flourish. An advertisement in the *Newport Mercury* for October 29, 1799 proclaimed:

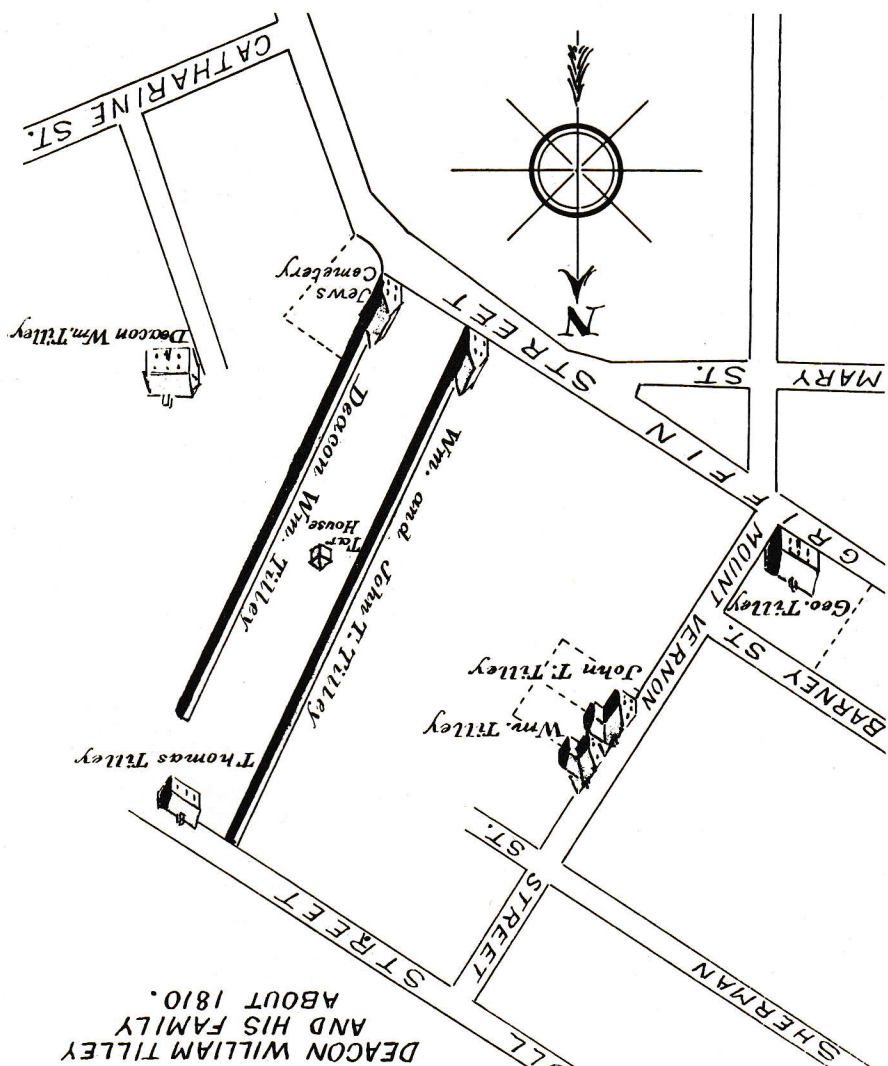
"Daniel W. Barker & Co. Inform the Public, that they have lately erected a Ropewalk at the South End of Town; where they have, for Sale, Boltrope; Cordage and Cables of all Dimensions; Rigging by the Suit turned out at the shortest Notice and manufactured equal to any in the United States."

From time to time during the next few years Barker advertised in that fashion. But his venture seems to have been short-lived. By August 1806 this ropewalk was up for sale.¹³ What happened to it in the next decade is unknown. Perhaps failing to negotiate a sale, Barker continued turning out his custom-made rope. He boasted in an ad of October 1810 that his stock was of "St. Petersburg's clean hemp." Then in the same ad follows a subtle aspersion cast on his competitors. "He does not make in his rope-walk any kind of white work which takes every kind of fine hemp, and leaves the coarse hemp or cordage." In other words, any merchant who supplied his own hemp would have the whole of it manufactured agreeably to his directions, as he, Barker, would never withhold the best hemp to load his own shelves with a desirable grade of white rope. Is this what his competitors were up to?

In October 1816, fire, the arch enemy of ropewalks, destroyed the building, it being hinted that the owner himself may have set it.

This setback to the industry locally ran counter to the trend of the state as a whole. "The industry must have been expanding," writes Coleman in his *The Transformation of Rhode Island*, "for the census of 1810 reported that thirteen ropewalks [in the state] produced 545 tons of rope valued at more than \$100,000."¹⁴

DEACON WILLIAM TILLEY
AND HIS FAMILY
ABOUT 1810.



Newport Historical Society

TILLEY MAP

Drawn by Jonas Bergner and showing Ropewalks and large tracts of land owned by the Tilley family.

Photo by John Hopf

With the early arrival of the Tilley family in America had come the know-how of generations of ropemakers. Deacon William Tilley, whose father had set up a ropewalk before him, continued in his father's footsteps. He spent a long life at the trade, being born in 1738 and dying in 1825. He and his first wife, Elizabeth Rogers Tilley, brought seventeen children into the world, many of the boys learning the trade from their sire.¹⁵ With the Tilleys, ropewalks proliferated, not only in Newport, but elsewhere, New London and Boston, for example. A curious receipt signed by Isaac Couzins in 1724 reads:

"Received of James Tilley of New London eight hundred and twenty one pound of cordage which I promise to deliver to Mr. John Sabber in Newport it being shipt upon the dangers of the Seas cue of Mr. John Sabber Att Rhode Island the dangers of the Seas excepted."¹⁶ Evidently Newport was not yet meeting the local demand for rope.

Deacon William, the patriarch, lived on Elizabeth Street and owned all the land between Towno Synagogue and the Jewish Cemetery. He constructed there two ropewalks, one roughly where Whitefield Place is, while the other later formed the roadbed of Kay Street, presumably from Towno, then known as Griffin Street, back a quarter of a mile to the first bend on Kay Street.

In 1770 William Vernon, owner of no small fleet of vessels, ran up a bill owed to Deacon William Tilley for cordage, spun yarn, lines and worming. It totaled £ 3,358.¹⁷

A certain customer of Deacon William, namely Christopher Champlin, owed £ 61 for cordage, worming, skeins of marling, bolt-rope and latchet-line, all of this for the schooner *James*.¹⁸ Of more interest, though, is a note among the Tilley papers detailing Champlin's order for cordage to rig his new vessel, the *Hope*. She would require 295 fathoms (i.e. 1,690 feet) of bolt rope. The order is dated August 1797. The good ship, *Hope*, was built at Bristol by Cromwell and Caleb Child, and was launched in 1796.¹⁹ Although the following retrospective newspaper account has no particular bearing on ropewalks, it merits inclusion as a digression:

"Mr. Champlin was a believer in astrology, and it so happened that certain stars were in such a position that at the time he wished the launch to take place, it was entirely low water or at low tide; but it was a fine launch. The ship was very successful indeed. At one time the *Hope* with another ship lay in Newport harbor, and at the hour Mr. C. had set for sailing, a heavy north-east gale, was raging. The *Hope* sailed at the height of the gale, and made a very quick passage to her point of destination. The other ship waited until the gale had subsided, or until the next day, when she sailed and was never heard from."²⁰

The Tilleys advertised in 1810 for apprentices to the rope-

making business, hoping to locate two smart, active lads of about sixteen years of age, to whom "encouragement" would be given.²¹ Just what form the "encouragement" took, we can only guess. An apprentice who spent all his time turning the wheel doubtless needed encouragement, lest he end up in the frame of mind of the boy in Robert Frost's poem who rebelled against turning the grindstone for his grandfather, until he confessed: "I'd welcome any moderate disaster / That might be calculated to postpone / What evidently nothing could conclude."²²

The following indenture well illustrates the nature of apprenticeship with its binding restrictions:

"This Indenture Witnesseth, That I Sarah Hunt of Newport, in the County of Newport & State of Rhode Island etc. Widow, hath put and placed, and by these Presents doth put & bind out her Son William Hunt, and the said William Hunt doth hereby put, place & bind out himself as an Apprentice to Hersey Bradford Merchant & Benjamin Tilley Rope-maker both of Bristol, in the County of Bristol & State aforesaid, to learn the art, trade or mystery of a Rope-maker; the said William Hunt after the manner of an Apprentice to serve the said Hersey Bradford & Benjamin Tilley from the Day of the date hereof until the third Day of April, which will be in the Year of our Lord One thousand eight hundred & fifteen, at which time the said Apprentice, if he should be living, will be twenty one Years of Age. During all which time or term, the said Apprentice and his s.d Masters faithfully shall serve, their secrets keep, their lawful commands obey; he shall do no damage to his said Masters, nor suffer any to be done by others, he shall not waste nor lend the goods of his Masters unlawfully; at Cards, Dice, or any other unlawful game he shall not play. Forfeiture he shall not commit nor Matrimony contract, during the said term; Taverns, Ale houses, or places of Gaming he shall not haunt or frequent, from the service of his Master he shall not absent himself, but in all things & at all times he shall behave himself as a good & faithful Apprentice ought during the term aforesaid.

And the said Hersey Bradford on his part, doth hereby promise covenant and agree to teach & instruct, or cause the said Apprentice to be taught & instructed in the Art, Trade, or Calling of a Rope-maker, by the best ways and means he can; also find & provide for the said Apprentice good & sufficient Victuals, Drink, Washing & Lodgings and to give him One Quarter Schooling each Winter evenings during said term; and in lieu of Clothing to pay him forty five Dollars Yearly and every Year during said term, to be paid half yearly; and at the expiration of said term to dismiss said Apprentice from their service with his wearing Apparel and to give him a New Suit of Cloths suitable for Sundays.

In testimony whereof the parties of these Presents have hereunto interchangeably set their hands & Seals, this Twenty Eighth Day of October in the Year of our Lord One thousand eight hundred and eleven.

Signed Sealed & delivered
in presence of us
Benjamin B Bliving
Mersey B Bliving
Benj W Dotey

Hersey Bradford
Benjⁿ Tilley
Sarah Hunt
William Hunt²³

Once apprenticeship was over, those trained became known as Journeymen Ropemakers, qualified to work at the trade no longer as apprentices nor yet as masters, but as day laborers. Newport's ropewalks must have offered many opportunities along these lines, as we find an advertisement in 1825 for Journeymen Ropemakers, twenty or thirty good spinners, to whom immediate and steady employment would be given at liberal wages.²⁴

On his decease Deacon William Tilley bequeathed his ropewalks to William Jr. and John T. Tilley, his sons, and this included the walks themselves, the tar house and other equipment.

Another Tilley ropewalk occupied what is now Callender Avenue, running from Warner Street to Tanner Street, the present West Broadway. Opposite stood the Duck Manufactory which turned out sail cloth. This ropewalk appears on the pre-Revolutionary Blaskowitz map, but nothing is known of it at that period. Abraham and George Tilley apparently rebuilt this ropewalk in 1802, and William Tew Tilley later operated it. Among the Tilley papers we find an agreement to end a disagreement. It reads:

"We Abraham Tilley George Tilley & Clarke Cook on the one part & John Hammond on the other mutually agree to leave all our disputes concerning the building the Rope Walk and out houses to Jethro Briggs Jonathan Lawton and Silas S. Greene and do agree to stand by the decisions they shall make and settle the amount accordingly [sic] Signed Newport Dec. 29, 1802.25

Two years later these Tilleys were selling cordage, cables, bolt rope, worming, houselines, marline, cod and log lines, deep sea and hand lead lines, bedcords and White rope. The "worming" refers to a fine cord used aboard ship to fill in the creases of heavy ropes or hawsers, when a smooth surface was needed. Once lined with worming, a rope was "parceled", that is, wrapped with overlapping strips of canvas. Finally, it was "served", or bound with a small cord in tight spirals. The seamen applied the worming and parceled with the lay of the original rope. They served in the reverse direction, hence the familiar rhyme:

Worm and parcel with the lay,
Turn and serve the other way.

As elsewhere, fires and accidents were not unknown here, and advances in techniques were tried. Here we find mentioned that the great wheel at the end of the walk was turned by a horse at a windlass.

A recollection of Abraham Tilley at work still persists in a letter

written in March, 1913 by his grandson, Milton F. Tilley, of Connecticut. He writes:

"... when I was about nine years old (1891) one Bill Benson, about fifty then, who drove an ice wagon for my father, told me that he well remembered how my grandfather, with his powerful lungs, used to direct the workmen at his ropewalk."

Benjamin Howland in his *The Streets of Newport, R.I.* (1892) credits William Tew Tilley with having recently taken down the old ropewalk and naming the new street in its place Callender Avenue. This ended the long history of a family trade.

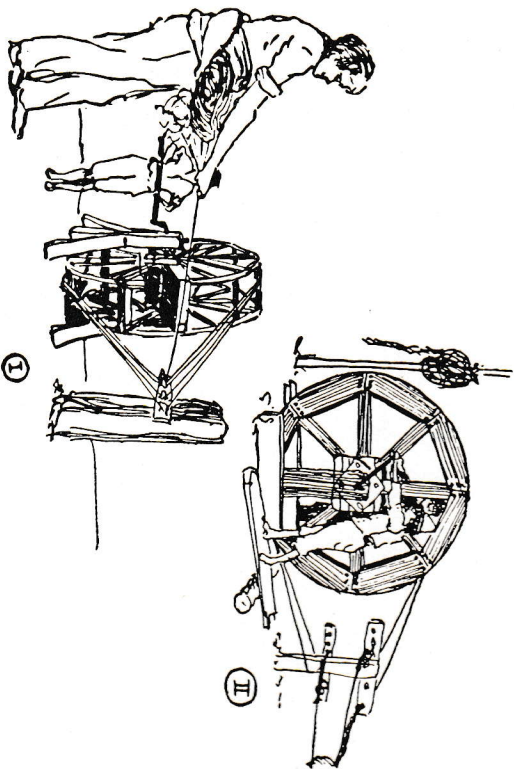
The Tew family, likewise of long standing in Newport, and one that numbered privateers among its members, also listed ropemakers in its ranks. Job Tew, who lived on Fir Street, kept a ropewalk at the present Tew's Court, off Old Beach Road. It stretched back toward Downing Street. Job, and later Josiah and Joseph Tew figured there from the 1820s to the 1870s, when James Clarke took over the business. In August 1842 the tar kettle at this ropewalk boiled over, causing a fire that brought out the fire company. Fortunately the damage was described as trifling.

What gallant ships were fitted out with cordage from Tew's ropewalk, and whether or not its owners exported their manufactures are questions we find no answers to. Coleman asserts that ropemakers did not merely attempt to meet local demand; they aspired to enter the export trade.²⁶ Whatever its success, this firm kept afloat until 1876 under Clarke, the last ropemaker to practice the trade in Newport. The end came when in 1876, two days after Christmas, fire broke out. A heavy snowfall delayed the fire trucks, and firefighters threw buckets of snow as well as water on the blaze. Reportedly uninsured, the plant suffered \$1,000 damage.

The ropewalk frequently referred to as Brinley's appears to have started out as Evan Malbone's. We find John Banister owing Malbone in 1747 £494 for cordage to be used on the ship *Snow William*. This ropewalk occupied the east end of the present Catherine Street, sloping down past Rhode Island Avenue. That it suffered fire in October 1752 we infer from a note by Banister, also that Malbone was owed by Banister £202 in 1754 for cable.

After the Revolution not Malbone but Francis Brinley managed and owned the firm. Historian George Channing observed that "nearly all of the United States vessels were fitted for sea at Newport", a statement difficult to substantiate. But he continues, "*The Congress*, I well recollect was entirely rigged and furnished with ample cables, from Mr. Francis Brinley's ropewalk."²⁷

OF THE EARTH EARTHY



*They are still making rope from the waist, in
foreign lands*

Courtesy Columbia Rope Company

Courtesy Redwood Library and Athenaeum

ROPEMAKING

Photo by John Hopf

Drawing taken from the book *Of the Earth Earthy* by Marion Nicholl Rawson; E. P. Dutton & Co., 1937; 306.

from his hands it seems to have passed by auction in 1820 to his son, Edward Brinley, who fared not too well. In a tax statement made before the Tax Assessors in 1815, while his father was still partner in the firm, Brinley complained:

"Edward Brinley having been considerably overated for the last two or three years, thinks proper to inform the assessors of the present Tax, that he considers the one half of the Rope Walk the only ratable property he has; he has no Stock of Hemp or Cordage . . . "28

Nevertheless, he held on until Richard Johnson bought the ropewalk in 1834. It appears on maps in 1845 and 1850, but must have closed soon after.

The celebrated tale concerning this ropewalk, and the one with which this paper will draw to a close, occurred when Francis Brinley still owned it.

As chronicled in the Newport Mercury a fire broke out on August 22, 1797 at 2 o'clock P.M. occasioned by the boiling over of the tar kettle. As a result of this accident, the tar house with its contents and about one quarter part of the ropewalk were consumed. But a more colorful account of the fire comes from the pen of George Channing:

"I shall never forget the burning of Mr. Francis Brinley's extensive ropewalks, erected near the present site of the Fillmore House, the most extensive establishment of the kind in the country. The smoke from the immense tar-kettles, and from the large amount of the same combustible in barrels, was wafted by a strong wind into every section of the town. The houses on the hill were largely impregnated with it. It happened in August, 1797, one of the very hottest days, rendering the air insupportable. It was a sight worth seeing, the processions of hardy seamen, from time to time passing by our house and down Mary Street, bearing upon their shoulders immense hempen cables, manufactured by Mr. Brinley for use of United-States frigates sent to this noble harbor for their outfit. It was curious, the ease with which these huge ropes were borne through the streets by the sailors, who took the 'lock-step'; and, by this means, the weight of the cable was distributed, and none were overburdened."²⁹

FOOTNOTES

1. In addition to these nine, some scanty information exists about a tenth ropewalk, owned by Daniel Anderson, whose name appears in the *Newport Directory* for 1856-57. According to that listing, Anderson was a cordage manufacturer located at Finch & Eng's Wharf. As that wharf seems an unlikely place for a ropewalk, perhaps Anderson made rope by machine which required less space. At any rate, his death is recorded at the City Hall as occurring Oct. 22, 1866.
2. This name and its early date come from a useful but exasperating source, George H. Richardson's list of occupations, comprising *Scrap-book No. 982* at the Newport Historical Society. Richardson offers no

- sources for his information. Among thirteen other ropemakers he lists "Thomas Cooper 1750", who is known to have been involved in a court case in Newport over the sale of cordage.
3. See the Acts and Resolves of the Colony of Rhode Island for August, 1722 and March 1726.
4. Newport Town Council Records, April 30, 1729 at Newport Historical Society.
5. The Early Records of the Town of Providence. Providence, Snow & Farnham, 1895, v.8, 103.
6. Full accounts of the techniques may be found in: *Popular Technology; or, Professions and Trades*, by Edward Hazen. N.Y., E.P. Dutton, c. 1937.
7. Turner, Henry E. *Newport 1800-1850*. Reprinted from the Newport Daily News, March 24, 25, 1897.
8. Barnister, John. *Journal*, 1750, 97; March 6, 1750. Owned by the Newport Historical Society.
9. Barnister, John. *Copy Book of Letters*, 1739, 48. Owned by the Newport Historical Society.
10. Bull, Henry. *Memoirs*, v.3, 138. Scrapbook at the Newport Historical Society.
11. Because no names are attached to this ropewalk or to the preceding, we may have incorrectly interchanged the two, but the bulk of evidence seems to attest that the southerly ropewalk on Farewell St. was Collins' and Flaggs'.
12. Howland, Benjamin B. *The Streets of Newport, R.I. in Magazine of New England History*, April 1892, v.2, no. 2, 87.
13. *Newport Mercury*, August 2, 1806.
14. Coleman, Peter J. *The Transformation of Rhode Island, 1790-1860*. Providence, Brown University Press, 1963, 38.
15. Tilley, R. Hammitt. *Genealogy of the Tilley Family*. Newport, Sanborn, 1878.
16. *Tilley Papers*. Newport Historical Society.
17. *Vernon Papers*. Newport Historical Society.
18. *Tilley Papers*. Newport Historical Society.
19. Richardson, George H. *Scrapbook 972*, 3. Newport Historical Society.
20. Stanhope, Clarence. *Scrapbook H*, 42. Newport Historical Society.
21. *Newport Mercury*, October 6, 1810.
22. Frost, Robert. "The Grindstone" from *The Poems of Robert Frost*. N.Y., Modern Library, c. 1946; 210.
23. Document at the Newport Historical Society.
24. *Newport Mercury*, February 26, 1825.
25. *Tilley Papers*. Newport Historical Society.
26. Coleman, Peter J. Op. cit., 37.
27. Channing, George. *Early Recollections of Newport, R.I. from the Year 1793 to 1811*. Newport, A.J. Ward & Charles E. Hammitt, 1868, 132-133.
28. Document at Redwood Library and Athenaeum.
29. Channing, George. Op. cit., 23-24.