



SOUTH ROPEWALK

IN THE AGE OF SAILING SHIPS, rope spun in great lengths was an essential commodity in a maritime town like Portsmouth. To meet this need, a number of cordage manufactories, or "ropewalks," were built in town. During the War of 1812, the three that were still in operation were each over 800 feet long. The long, narrow shape of these buildings was necessary because the length of a rope depended on the length of the building in which it was spun. Filled with highly flammable tarred hemp, these structures were especially vulnerable to fire, and several burned in spectacular blazes!



1850 MAP of PORTSMOUTH

The longest-used ropewalk in Portsmouth was located along the southern shore of the South Mill Pond. It was built after 1753 by Jonathan Ayres, a shoemaker who leased it to professional ropemakers. Following Ayres' death in 1802, William Pepperrell Pickering, a local cordage manufacturer, ran it for several years. During the War of 1812, Joseph Akerman III put the old building into use again, but in 1814 it burned in a fire that spread so fast "that in a few minutes...the Walk was entirely enveloped in flames."

Map of the Compact Part of the City of Portsmouth, 1850, H.F. Walling, cartographer. Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenæum.



SKETCH of ROPEWALK BUILDING

As early as the War of 1812, the town pressed the ropewalk into service as a barracks for some of the soldiers who had been drafted from country villages for the defense of Portsmouth. Early in the Civil War, it again served briefly as the barracks of the Second Regiment of the New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry.

The Old Ropewalk Barracks, Portsmouth, Process Reproduction of Pencil Drawing by Israel T. Hunt, from *A History of the Second Regiment, New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry, in the War of Rebellion, 1896*, by Martin A. Haynes. Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenæum.



CLIPPER SHIP NIGHTINGALE

By the 1850s clipper ship era, the ropewalk on South Mill Pond was the only one between Salem, Massachusetts and the Kennebec River in Maine. Most Portsmouth-built ships, as well as many vessels built in Maine and Massachusetts, were rigged with line from this factory. In 1859 Charles Brewster noted, "the graceful *Nightingale*" and other clippers like *Dashing Wave* and *Coeur de Lion* all bore "the product of the Portsmouth cordage factory."

"Clipper Ship *Nightingale*—Getting Under Way off the Battery, New York," from Color Plates reproduced from the Original Hand Colored Stone Prints by N. Currie and Currier & Ives, 1966, Print Portfolio Series Sailing Ships, Hammond Incorporated, Maplewood, New Jersey. Courtesy of Richard Candee.

1833 CORDAGE AD

Jeremiah Johnson from Newburyport (for whom Johnson's Court is named) rebuilt the walk in the early 1830s. During this time, the ropewalk realized its greatest prosperity. Although the building burned again in 1854, Johnson rebuilt the ropewalk as an 800 foot-long building and added a steam engine to power the spinning machines. This doubled the amount of cordage made by all the ropewalks in Portsmouth during the days when the machinery was hand-powered.

Newspaper ad in the *Portsmouth Journal*, November 16, 1833. Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenæum.



Funding for this historic marker was provided by the City of Portsmouth, 2009.

www.cityofportsmouth.com