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The History of Ropewalk Lane



by **David Safier**

If you want to know how Ropewalk Tavern on South Charles Street got its name, look no further than the corner signpost for Ropewalk Lane.

Which begs the question: how did Ropewalk Lane get its name? Here's the answer: From approximately 1750 to 1860, two ropewalks, each a thousand feet long (more than the length of three football fields laid end to end) stretched from Race Street to just before Light Street along the path where Ropewalk Lane is today.

What is a Ropewalk?

A ropewalk was a long shed or a stretch of ground where strands of fiber were twisted together to create long, continuous strands of rope. Cities like Baltimore, Boston and New York, among others, had multiple ropewalks to supply the needs of their shipping and ship building industries. The first ropewalk in America was built in Salem, Massachusetts in 1635. They continued to be used for rope making until the end of the Civil War when more advanced techniques took their place.

The two ropewalks in our neighborhood are the oldest in Baltimore, based on the information I was able to find. They were built sometime after 1750 by William Lux. William is not especially well known, unlike his more famous father, Darby Lux, a mariner and merchant who lived on Light Street a few blocks north of Pratt. One of the few houses in the area at the time, it can be seen in a

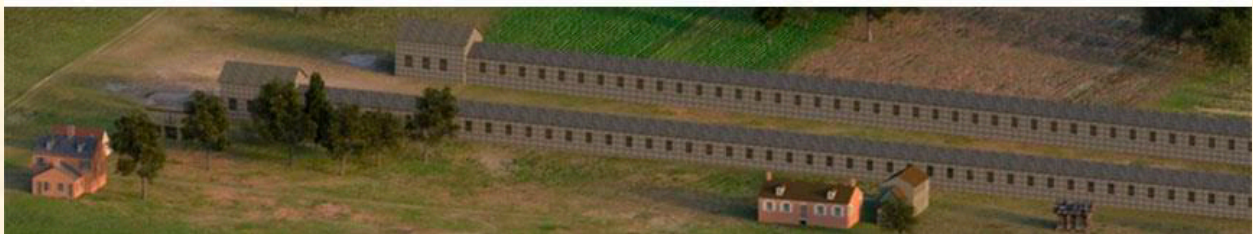
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1752 sketch of the sparsely populated city. Darby Lux had a wharf on Light Street, and the street was named in his honor, translating the Latin word “Lux” into the English “Light.”

The Ropewalks of Ropewalk Lane

The two ropewalks where Ropewalk Lane currently runs are depicted in the famous 1822 Poppleton map of Baltimore as two thick black lines. A more vivid representation can be found on the online Baltimore map created by the Imaging Research Center at University of Maryland, Baltimore County. (The map is an amazing resource for anyone interested in Baltimore’s beginnings.)

Below is a section of the UMBC map with the two ropewalks in the upper right, along with a closer look at the sheds. It was just beyond the southernmost housing in early 18th century Baltimore, in the midst of trees and farms.



The ropewalks changed hands over the years. In 1850 they were known as the Croxall & Browning Ropewalk. The owners placed an ad in the Sun that year to sell the ropewalks “with all its rigging.” According to the ad, the contents included:

- 3,800 lbs. Russia Yarn, in bobbing
- 3,400 lbs American and 600 lbs. Italian, in do.
- 3 hauls, 2,000 lbs, American Yarns
- 500 lbs. American Band Stuff
- 2,300 lbs. Manilla Yarn, in bobbing
- 7 coils, weighing 1,250 lbs, Manilla Rope
- 3,500 lbs. Russia Tippit tarred Yarns
- 3 winches, 600 lbs, Russia do. do.
- 1 reel of 500 lbs, Russia Yarn
- 6 hauls, 4,500 lbs do., Taw and Tier Tarred
- 850 lbs. Russia, 1,000 lbs Country, 250 lbs Hackled Hemp
- 26 bbls of Tar

Also included in the sale items, as if they were the equivalent of pieces of machinery, were “two COLORED BOYS for a term of years, and a COLORED GIRL, slave for life.”

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The arduous ropewalk work was sometimes performed by enslaved people, as appears to have been the case here.

By the 1860s, the two ropewalks were being phased out and replaced by homes.

Another ropewalk on the west side of Baltimore is shown on a 1792 map, starting at Eutaw and Lee and stretching southwest from there. It doesn't show up on later maps, so it may have been in operation for a short time.

Ropewalks in East Baltimore

On the east side of the city from Fells Point northward, there were at least seven ropewalks, maybe more, in the early 1800s. They are designated on the Poppleton map, but once again they are more easily recognizable on the UMBC's pictorial map. I circled the ones I could find below; likely there are others I didn't spot. If you link to the map and enlarge it, you can see them in greater detail.



The most unusual placement for a ropewalk, which isn't shown here, was the one running down the center of East Broadway, then called Market Street, which explains why the street is so wide.

Because they were so long and easily recognizable, ropewalks often were used as landmarks in newspaper stories and ads. (From two 1839 ads: "Apply to MILTON WEBB, Light Street near the Rope-walk"; "STRAY HORSE—Was taken up yesterday morning in Ann street, near the ropewalk")

Baltimore's ropewalks were subject to fires, as were others around the country. The piles of loose hemp strands and the hemp dust in the air were highly flammable. Most of the fires were either accidental or set by arsonists, but in one case, in 1814, a Baltimore ropewalk was purposely set afire by the U.S. Army.

During the War of 1812, after the British set fire to much of Washington D.C., Baltimore became a target for the British. So many U.S. regiments poured into Baltimore in 1814 to defend the city, there wasn't enough room to house them, so some regiments took advantage of the shelter offered by the ropewalk's sheds, which housed as many as 500 troops each. When the fighting ensued, the American troops were forced to fall back. They took a position on the high ground of

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Hampstead Hill, which is today's Patterson Park. The officers then ordered that a 1,000 foot ropewalk to the east be burnt to the ground so the British could not use it for cover.

Two months later, the owner of the burnt ropewalk petitioned Congress to pay him for his lost property. He had been manufacturing "good navy cordage" for the Navy, he wrote, and had been promised that he would be compensated by the government in case of loss by fire. He continued,

"In the month of September last, the rope-walks in which the cordage was manufacturing and then deposited, was set on fire by order of General Forman, who then commanded the Maryland militia at that place; in consequence of which the rope-walks were destroyed, and, with them, about thirty tons of Russia hemp, belonging to the Government, and all the labor and profit of the petitioner."

The House of Representatives agreed to compensate him for his loss.

Longfellow's Ropewalk Poem

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the famous 19th century American poet, published a poem titled "The Rope Walk" in 1854. It waxed nostalgic about an industry which was soon to fade from the American landscape. The poem begins:

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.

In the following stanzas, Wordsworth lets his mind wander to people using the industry's products: "Two fair maidens in a swing"; a woman drawing water from a well; an old man pulling on the bell rope in a tower; a gallows-tree in a prison yard; a school-boy flying his kite; sailors dropping a ship's anchor. The poet returns to ropewalk in the final stanza:

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.