

ROPEWALK

Hosted by: Museum of Old Newbury



In 1748, John Crocker (1692-1763) erected a ropewalk at the northeasterly end of the Bartlet Mall, parallel with High Street. This facility manufactured ropes and lines that were essential to the shipbuilding and maritime shipping industries.

A ropewalk is a long, narrow wooden building resembling a covered bridge. A rope maker would walk the length of the building backwards as he twisted rope into being, giving the ropewalk its name. As a rope is made, it is stretched out to its full length, making the size of the ropewalk an important factor in production capacity. Crocker's ropewalk was 209 yards long, enabling him to make ropes of the same length.

In the 18th century, rope was made from natural fibers, typically hemp. These fibers were first spun into yarn, and then several yarns were twisted together to form a strand. Finally, multiple strands (typically three) were twisted together into a length of rope. In each stage of production, the fibers would be twisted in the opposite direction of the previous stage, lending added strength to the finished rope.

For more than 2 centuries Newburyport and contiguous communities grew crops of hemp to be made into rope to meet the demands of the maritime trades and for transportation, commerce and defense. For many years, Rowley surpassed the other towns in the local production of hemp.

Before building his ropewalk, John Crocker was a ship captain in Boston, sailing primarily in the London trade. In 1737, Crocker and his wife Mary Savage moved from Boston to the waterside district of Newbury. Ten years later, Crocker petitioned the town for permission to construct a ropewalk, stating that "his present occupation of rope making has been found for time past very beneficial not only for the sea faring business of this town, but also as thereby many poor people are employed. He therefore asks permission to set up a ropewalk between Abiel Somerby's land and the windmill." His petition was granted, and the ropewalk was built in 1748.

Crocker was prominent both in the business and religious communities of the town, serving as vestryman or warden of St. Paul's Church for over ten years. Crocker died in 1763, one year before Newburyport was set off from Newbury as a separate town. His ropewalk disappeared from the Frog Pond sometime after 1771.



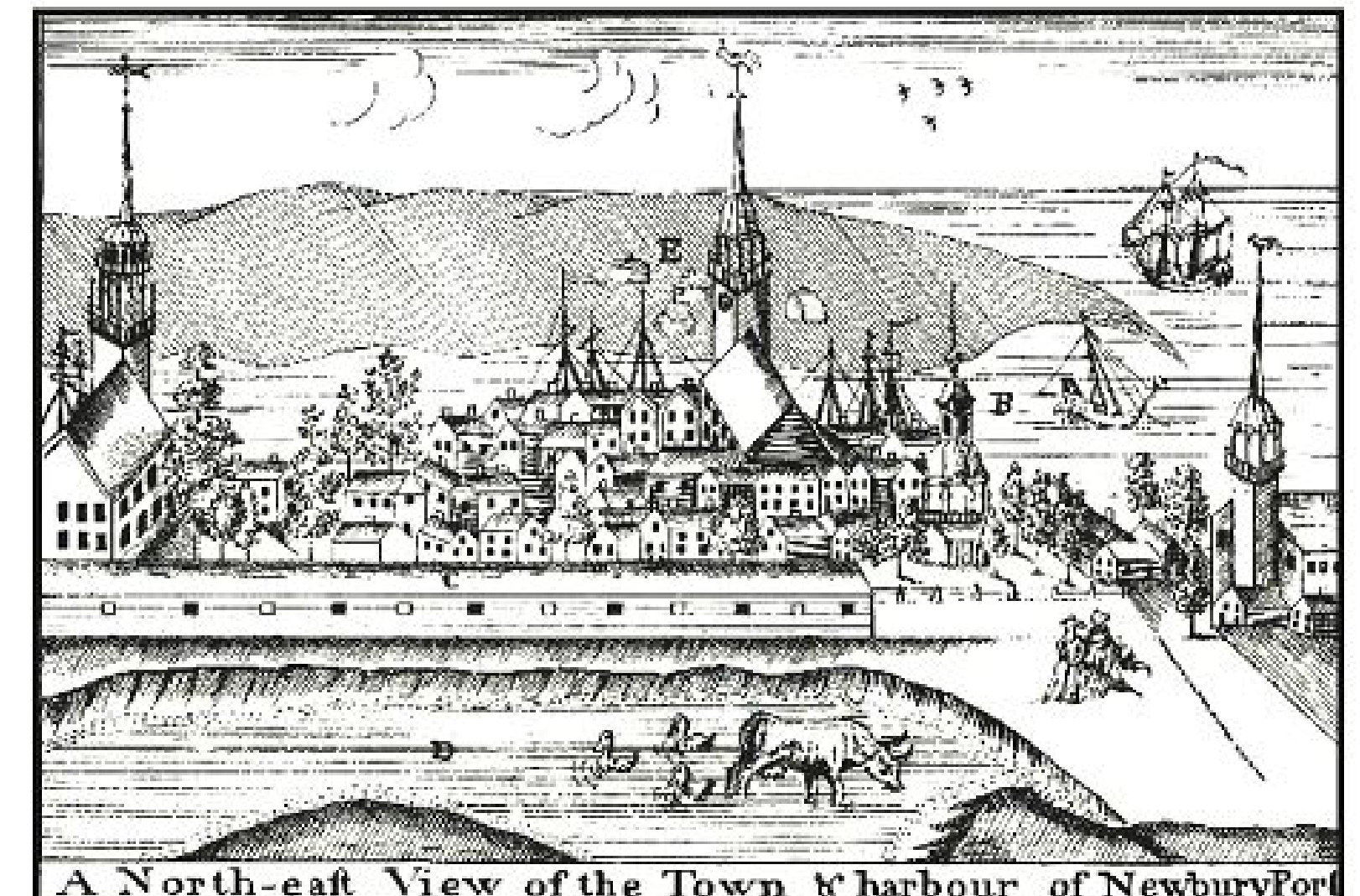
John Crocker, artist unknown, c. 1750

Excerpt from "The Ropewalk"
by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

*In that building long and low,
With its windows all a-row,
Like the port-holes of a bulk,
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 whirring 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,
Gleam the long threads in the sun;
While within this brain of mine
Cobwebs brighter and more fine
By the busy wheel are spun.*



Newburyport Townscape, artist unknown, after 1774