



Ropewalk War

Trenton Sunday Times Advertiser, Date Unknown

When Mill Hill Was Agog Over Ropewalk War --- Had You Ever Heard of Mercer Street Revolt?

By John J. Cleary

There are few Trentonians with a head for local history who do not know something about the famous "frog war" which was fought out when the newly organized Bound Brook railroad company attempted to cross the Pennsylvania railroad tracks near Hopewell years ago. The "stone hackers" war, less familiar perhaps but still fairly well within local knowledge, occurred when a lot of men whose business of gathering cobblestones from the river and shipping them on scows to Philadelphia for street-paving was damaged by the erection of a wing dam at Scudder's Falls, tore out by force the preliminary work of the new improvement. But who that now treads the streets of Trenton, can give the details of the Mill Hill ropewalk war?

The writer, in all his researches into the history of this interesting old neighborhood, never had the matter mentioned to him until Samuel W. Margerum recently asked why it had not received some attention in the Times-Advertiser. There was a group of listeners, some of them passing for veteran citizens too, who were inclined to think that Sam was romancing. Certainly none present could throw any light upon the subject.

"Look it up!" was Mr. Margerum's terse injunction.

It took some probing to dig down to the facts but the enquiry was worth while. Mill Hill's ropewalk war was not a myth. The local dailies of seventy years ago tell all about it and it makes an interesting yarn.

Under the caption, "Outrage in the Third Ward," the State Gazette of September 20, 1851, says: "Night before last, near midnight, the rope-walk of Rickey & Whittaker, in the Third Ward, was attacked by a party of men and partially pulled down. This rope-walk crosses Mercer Street - a street running parallel with Jackson Street. The street has never been opened except for a short distance south of Market Street. The owners of the property in that vicinity had petitioned Common Council to have the rope-walk removed and the street carried through. Council

instructed the street committee to do so, provided it could be done legally.

"Without waiting for the action of the street committee, a party of persons took the matter into their own hands and contrary to law, forcibly sawed away the timbers and removed the rope-walk the whole width of the street.

"Messrs. Rickey & Whittaker yesterday morning proceeded to put up a fence for the purpose of going on with their work. The fence was partially put up when two or three persons residing in the neighborhood appeared and against the orders of Mr. Rickey to desist, proceeded to tear down the fence, and declared that the street should not be obstructed," etc.

The controversy naturally agitated all Trenton, and especially Mill Hill mightily. Public sympathy appeared to be with the people who had taken the law into their own hands, and the street committee of Common Council began apparently to excuse their own tardiness by declaring that it had been their intention to do in a legal way what had been accomplished illegally.

A few days later, a card appeared in the local papers, giving the side of the aggrieved citizens. It was signed by Amos Cook, John Shields, Alexander Reed, William Johnston and George Hawze, all men of standing, and it proceeded in part as follows:

"The subscribers, freeholders and residents of Mercer Street leading from Quintin's bridge to the new rolling mill in the city of Trenton, (by this mill was evidently meant the plant on Hamilton Avenue), respectfully state that we were induced to purchase lots and erect dwelling-houses and make improvements upon said street, in the winter and spring of 1850, under positive engagement with Mr. John Whittaker, from whom we obtained our title deeds, that he had leased the rope-walk ground for five years when there were no buildings or improvements upon the said street, which lease had expired. And that the present lease was upon condition that the rope-walk obstruction should be removed at any time when the citizens interested demanded it. * * * Early last spring we complained of the existing obstruction and the violation of our rights. Mr. Stille, the tenant, gave assurance that he was going out of business and would finish his stock by June or July and the obstruction should then be removed, instead of which he sold out to others," and continued his business and the obstructions as heretofore.

The Mill Hillites went on to say that in view of Mr. Stille's action, they had gone to Common Council for relief and the Street Committee of that body after an investigation, reported the Mercer Street condition a public nuisance. Notice was served to this effect upon Mr. Whittaker who, however, gave it no attention.

John Whittaker by the way, was the merchant prince of South Broad Street at the time. He kept a general store opposite where the Court House stands, and in those days, a general store was a town institution, handling practically everything in the merchandising line. They used to say that one day a practical joker went into the Whittaker store and remarked casually:

"Mr. Whittaker I understand you sell about everything a customer can call for."

"That is our boast," the merchant replied, with evident pride in the resourcefulness of his establishment.

"I was looking for a ship's anchor," the caller then said, trying to conceal his exultation over Mr. Whittaker's coming discomfiture.

But it had happened that even that unusual implement had found its way accidentally into the country storekeeper's possession, but without any expectation of a buyer, so without a moment's hesitation, he called to one of his clerks:

"John go down cellar and show this gentleman the anchor you'll find in the northwest corner, and see if it is what he wants."

The practical joker bolted out of the door, having no use in the world for a ship's anchor. On another occasion, Mr. Whittaker was less fortunate, the customer in the case seeking a goose-yoke which was not in stock.

The Whittaker business included a lumber yard, also a coal yard and limekilns. Naturally a merchant of his stamp wielded a good deal of influence in his community and doubtless if Mercer Street were still in the Borough of South Trenton, it might have gone hard with the citizens who had laid violent hands upon his rope-walk. As it chanced, however, South Trenton had just been annexed to the City of Trenton and, perhaps, Mr. Whittaker forgetting he was now a small frog in a big pond, and relied too easily upon his personal strength in dealing with the people who had purchased building lots from him and made their homes on the newly-opened Mercer Street.

At first, the ropewalk proprietors vented their wrath by instituting a suit for damages against three persons who were charged with instigating the destruction of their property, and a time for a hearing before Squire A. Baily was fixed. The late Edward W. Scudder, afterwards a Supreme Court Justice, was retained for the plaintiffs and S.R. Hamilton, another capable lawyer, was engaged for the defense. The matter was town talk and a lively time was expected but by September 29 the anger of the complainants must have abated somewhat or else they recognized that they had a weak case, for at the hearing, both sides were inclined to humorous rather than vengeful thrusts and the case was postponed for three weeks. Whittaker et al. were evidently climbing down from their "high and mighty attitude," and it was generally thought that postponement would be the end of the "sham battle." So it proved.

The next development tending to confirm this view was a published announcement that Rickey & Whittaker were about to erect a rope-walk in Lambertton. There was a rope-walk in subsequent years running from Second to Centre Street, near the junction of Second with Third Street, and this, afterwards known as Moore's, was doubtless the walk which the evicted Mill Hillites erected. The Mercer Street rope-walk, by the way, was located south of Market Street.

"So you found out all about it," remarked Samuel W. Margerum yesterday when told of the foregoing disclosures. "Well, I told you so, didn't I?"

Mr. Margerum was only a child when the rope-walk was torn away, but young as he was he remembers often hearing the story of the long covered building where heaps of hemp were manufactured into rope and of its sudden finish. The familiar tradition of his youthful days was that among the men who actually tore away the eyesore were Aaron Carlile, John Margerum, Charles Nutt and John Bucknum. They were all early settlers in the vicinity and may have had a hand in the work of destruction together with those whose names were to the card given above.

State Gazette, 9/20/1851

OUTRAGE IN THE THIRD WARD

(Last 3 sentences not quoted in Cleary article)

If these persons acted from their own volition, they were certainly out of order, and did so in open violation of law. Messrs. Rickey & Whittaker took possession of these premises, with some assurances that they had a right to occupy them without being molested; and if the progress of improvement has made it necessary that the street should be opened, the law points out the mode and the persons who are to perform this duty. It will not do to sanction the doctrine that men are to take the law into their own hands.

State Gazette, Page 2, 9/30/1851

The parties in the rope-walk trial appeared yesterday, before Bailey A. West, Esq. After some chaffering the case was adjourned for three weeks.

Daily True American, Page 2, 9/3/1851

COMMON COUNCIL, MONDAY Sept. 1, 1851

A verbal report was made in reference to the Ropewalk in the Third Ward. A resolution was adopted to have it removed, if it can be done legally.

Daily True American, Page 2, 9/20/1851

MERCER STREET

Between eleven and twelve o'clock on Thursday night some persons deliberately took down that part of the Ropewalk of Rickey & Whittaker, which stands across Mercer street. The timbers was (sic) sawed off, and removed out of the way so as to afford a free opening to the street. The ropes which were in the process of being twisted and, for that purpose, stretched from one end of the walk to the other, were not disturbed. Mr. Rickey ordered a temporary fence put up for the purpose of going on with his work. This was removed and the workmen compelled to desist. In this state of things the operations of the rope makers have been suspended for the present.

It is said that this Ropewalk is actually in the street, but that the present proprietors took it with all the rights and privileges which it previously enjoyed, among which was the right to the whole lot. Recent improvements have made it necessary to have the street opened, but notwithstanding

this, the persons who made the attack on the building on Thursday night and removed a part of it, were clearly in the wrong. The proper persons to open the street were the Street Committee, and any others who ventured to do so were acting in open violation of law.

We have since learned from one of the persons who assisted in taking down the fence, yesterday morning, that he did so because he did not wish to see the street closed up after having been once opened. And as an owner of property on the street, he is not willing to have it closed.

Daily True American, Page 2, 9/26/1851

THE ROPE WALK

The proprietors of the Rope Walk on Mill Hill, have brought suit against three persons for tearing down a portion of the rope walk, laying their damages at \$100. The matter excites some considerable interest on the streets. The return day of the summons, we understand, is on Monday. Whether the trial will proceed on that day is a matter of uncertainty. It may be adjourned. The suit was commenced before Baily A. West, Esq.

Daily True American, Page 2, 9/29/1851

THE ROPE WALK TRIAL

The summons in this case is returnable to-day. The probabilities are, that it will be adjourned. E.W. Scudder, Esq., has been employed by the plaintiffs, and S.R. Hamilton, esq., by the defendants. The fight is one in which the people in the immediate neighborhood take considerable interest. The parties themselves, have been before the public, in the papers, and folk are anxious to learn how the matter will be decided.

The present proprietors hold the premises, under the lease given to Mr. Stille, by Mr. John Whittaker. The premises were leased for ten years, with a condition that if the ground should be wanted within five years, for a street or building purposes, then the same is to be removed, after the assessment by arbitration, of the damages in favor of the tenant. Mr. Whittaker sold the lots on Mercer street, with the understanding with the purchasers, that the street was to be opened as soon as the owners thereon should require it. The only point in controversy, is, as to the right of the persons to remove it who are charged with having done so, and on this point, it is likely the whole trial will be conducted. In the meantime, we hope the subject will continue to be discussed by the delvers in constitutional and municipal law in the Third Ward.

Daily True American, Page 2, 9/30/1851

MERCER STREET TROUBLE

The trial which was noticed to take place yesterday, for tearing away Rickey & Whittaker's ropewalk, under pretence of opening Mercer street, was adjourned for three weeks. The parties were present with their attorneys, and gave evidence of going into the merits of the case in very good humor.