Tarring the Yarns

Before mechanization, skeins or junks of yarn were dipped into vats of tar, heated by open flames below them. A roller or “nipper” wrung out the excess tar and the skein was rolled onto spools or stretched out the length of the walk. Tar working was a messy job.

Mariners using freshly tarred ropes got their hands stained by the strong smelling tar - hence the term “Jack Tar” for a navy sailor.

At Charles Town, a mechanized process simplified the job of tarring. Spools of clean yarn were drawn over a vat of tar, which was heated by steam pipes below the tank.

The rope heddle here, which is in the “up” position, drops the yarns into the tar. As the yarns come out of the tank, the nipper at the end wrings out the excess tar, the yarns are separated, went through a drying machine and were rolled onto spools for forming into strands.