

# Salty Talk (Teacher Version)

Here are the origins of these popular phrases that you may ask your students to research.

## 1. Know the Ropes

An experienced sailor was said to “know the ropes” if he had a good command of all the different knots that needed tying and all the ropes that controlled the sails on a vessel.

## 2. Loose Cannon

Cannons were secured to the ship’s side by ropes so they would not roll away out of control. If the cannon broke loose in a storm or in battle, it would careen around the deck creating all kinds of damage to the ship and crew.

## 3. Scuttlebutt

A small barrel is also called a “butt” and when placed on its side, a “scuttle,” or opening, can be made to allow for a ladle. This is how drinking water was served on *Constitution* (and other sailing vessels). It was a space where men congregated and may have gossiped; hence today “scuttlebutt” means news or gossip.

## 4. Shake a Leg

Sailors slept in hammocks and when it was time to wake up; they may have been asked to “shake a leg” to show that they were awake and moving. The phrase originally evolved to meaning someone who danced and eventually to someone being asked to hurry up.

## 5. Batten down the hatches

Hatches were wooden grates that covered openings in the top deck to provide ventilation to lower decks. When bad weather was expected, sailors “battened down” these openings with heavy cloths and wooden strips called “battens” that created a secure frame to prevent rain and waves from pouring into the decks below.