Seldom do we know the origins of the common phrases we use. I found these explanations interesting and I hope you will too.

**DRESSED LIKE A PHILADELPHIA LAWYER**

The first time I heard this expression was when we were visiting my in-laws. Puzzled by the phrase, I investigated its origin. Opinions range from “a well-dressed gentleman” to “a well educated and cunning attorney”, but none give much enlightenment as to where Philadelphia plays into the phrase. If anyone knows, please let me know.

**THREE SHEETS TO THE WIND**

This commonly used phrase that describes an inebriated person, is a nautical term that was used on sailing ships. Contrary to what one might think, the word “sheet” didn’t describe the sails, but rather the ropes that controlled the sails. If the ropes weren’t taut enough to hold the sails against the wind, the wind would take control of the vessel, causing it to be “two or three sheets to the wind.”

**LIKE A DRUNKEN SAILOR**

When merchant mariners with months of pay in their pockets went on shore leave, they tended to spend money on uncontrolled drinking and loose living. When we spend money foolishly we are said to “spend money like a drunken sailor.” The same is said of fiscally irresponsible government spending.

**A SHOT OF WHISKEY**

In the old west a .45 cartridge for a six-gun cost 12 cents, so did a glass of whiskey. If a cowhand was low on cash he would often give the bartender a cartridge in exchange for a drink. This became known as a "shot" of whiskey.

**THE WHOLE NINE YARDS**

American fighter planes in WW2 had machine guns that were fed by a belt of cartridges. The average plane held belts that were 27 feet (9 yards) long. If the pilot used up all his ammo he was said to have given it “the whole nine yards”.

**BUYING THE FARM**

During WW1 soldiers were given life insurance policies worth $5,000. This was about the price of an average farm so if the soldier died it was said that he "bought the farm" for his survivors.

**IRON CLAD CONTRACT**

This phrase was used to describe the iron-clad ships used in the Civil War. It was said that they were so strong they couldn’t be broken. Thus a binding contract is one that is “iron-clad”.

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The Origins of Familiar Expressions
by Bobbye Maggard
PASSING THE BUCK/THE BUCK STOPS HERE
Most men in the early west carried a jack knife made by the Buck Knife Company. When playing poker it was common to place one of these Buck knives in front of the dealer so that everyone knew who he was. When it was time for a new dealer the deck of cards and the knife were given to him. If he didn't want to deal he would "pass the Buck" to the next player. If that player accepted the position it was determined that "the Buck stopped there".

SAW-BUCK
This expression gets its origin from the easily constructed device for holding wood so that it may be sawn into pieces. With an "X" form at each end joined by cross bars below the intersections of the “X’s” a V is formed on which a piece of wood can rest as it is cut. The Roman symbol for ten is “X”, so it became popular slang to call a ten dollar bill a “sawbuck”.

RIFFRAFF
The Mississippi River was the main way of traveling from north to south. Riverboats carried passengers and freight but they were expensive so most people used rafts. Everything had the right of way over rafts which were considered cheap. The steering oar on the rafts was called a "riff" and this transposed into riffraff, meaning low class.

COBWEB
The Old English word for "spider" was "cob".

SHIP STATE ROOMS
Traveling by steamboat was considered the height of comfort. Passenger cabins on the boats were not numbered. Instead they were named after states. To this day cabins on ships are called staterooms.

SLEEP TIGHT
Early beds were made with a wooden frame. Ropes were tied across the frame in a criss-cross pattern. A Straw mattress was then put on top of the ropes. Over time the ropes stretched, causing the bed to sag. The owner would then tighten the ropes to get a better night's sleep.

SHOWBOAT
These were floating theaters built on a barge that was pushed by a steamboat. These played small towns along the Mississippi River. Unlike the boat shown in the movie "Showboat" these did not have an engine. They were gaudy and attention grabbing which is why we say someone who is being the life of the party is “showboating”.

OVER A BARREL
In the days before CPR a drowning victim would be placed face down over a barrel and the barrel would be rolled back and forth in an effort to empty the lungs of water. It was rarely effective. If you are “over a barrel” you are in deep trouble.
BARGE IN

Heavy freight was moved along the Mississippi in large barges pushed by steamboats. These were hard to control and would sometimes swing into piers or other boats. People would say they " barged in ".

HOGWASH

Steamboats carried both people and animals. Since pigs smelled so bad they would be washed before being put on board. The mud and other filth that was washed off was considered useless "hog wash".

CURFEW

The word "curfew" comes from the French phrase "couvre-feu", which means "cover the fire". It was used to describe the time of blowing out all lamps and candles. It was later adopted into Middle English as "curfeu", which later became the modern "curfew". In the early American colonies homes had no real fireplaces so a fire was built in the center of the room. In order to make sure a fire did not get out of control during the night it was required that, by an agreed upon time, all fires would be covered with a clay pot called a "curfew".

BARRELS OF OIL

When the first oil wells were drilled no provision had been made for storing the liquid so water barrels were used. That is why we speak of “barrels of oil” not gallons.

HOT OFF THE PRESS

As a newspaper goes through a rotary printing press, friction causes it to heat up. Therefore, if you grab a freshly issued newspaper, you’re getting the news “hot off the press”.