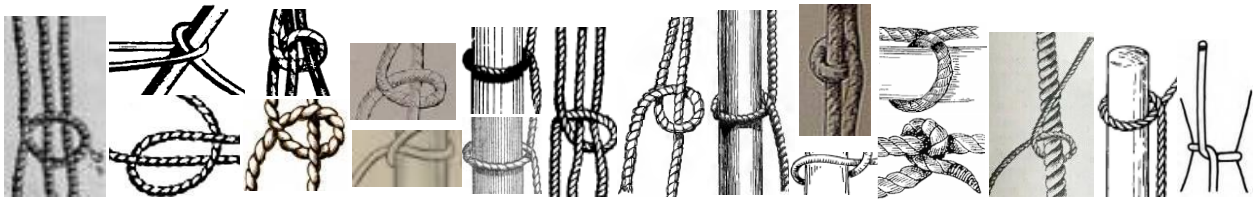
Will the Real Half Hitch Please Stand Up?

What do all of the images below have in common?



These images are from (L to R): Steel 1794, Lever 1808 (3), Falconer 1815, Brady 1841, Dana 1841, Nares 1862, Luce 1863, Burney 1871, Burgess 1884 (2), Bowling 1866, Verrill 1917 (3), Admiralty 1908-1937, Admiralty 1951-2015, Wikipedia 2019.

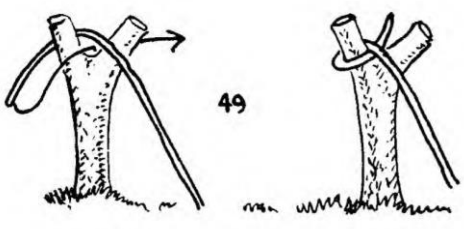
Many knot tiers will answer that they all depict a half hitch. Others will respond that some of them can not be half hitches. What is the origin of this difference of opinion about terminology to label the simplest of knot structures?

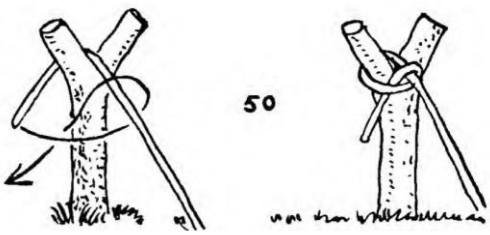
The dispute seems to originate with Ashley (1944), who suggested (apparently for the first time in print) that a distinction be made based on several criteria (pp. 14, 283-4) between:

A **Single Hitch** (#49): being a 'snug hitch', tied as a single turn around another object with the end secured under the turn, against the other object. The Single Hitch spills when removed from the other object. (The term had never before been defined to mean anything other than one hitch. Haslope 1891 perhaps came closest in illustration, but his description was 'merely a loop formed in a rope'.)

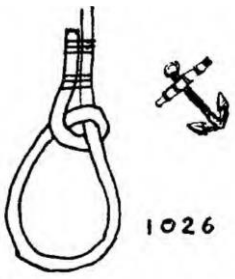
and

A **Half Hitch** (#50): being a 'loose hitch', tied with one end of a rope which is passed around an object and secured to its own standing part with a Single Hitch. The Half Hitch, upon removal from the other object around which it is passed, pulls up into an Overhand Knot. (The term "Half Hitch" had long been used to refer to a well-known knotting structure; whether used with an accessory structure – a U-turn – when mooring, or in multiples without accessory structures when lashing.)



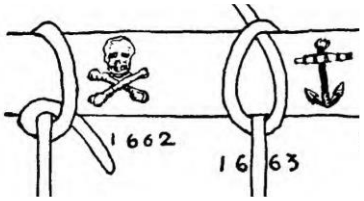


This suggestion left many unresolved problems of interpretation:



(i) The Half Hitch is often tied as an eye knot (#1026), going around no object before being secured to its own standing part. It then spills if the solid around which it is cast (its own standing part) is removed.

(ii) The Half Hitch (with a U-turn around another object) may spill under a load, even before it is removed from the other object (#1662).



(iii) The Half Hitch can be arranged with the end secured under the turn, against the other object (#1663).

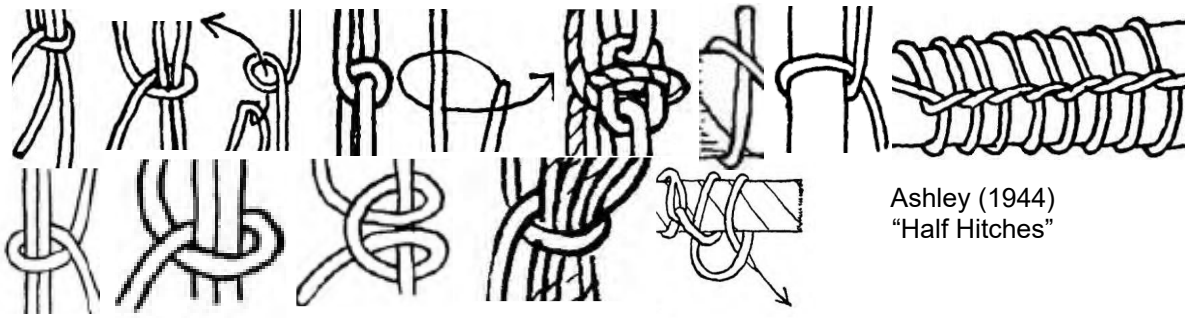
(iv) Versions of the Half Hitch may be tied in the bight: no end is required to tie the slipped half hitch (#52) over a bollard etc.

(v) It may be debatable or indiscernible whether the Half Hitch structure passes around its own standing part, as distinct from a similar rope (eg #1147, 1152, 1459).

(vi) Sailors did not make such a distinction (#1748).

> Strictly speaking, a hitch in a small rope around a bigger one is a SINGLE HITCH, but custom dictates that so long as the hitch is around a rope of sorts, the formation may be called a HALF HITCH. It is more liable to be called a SINGLE HITCH when it is taken around a spar. But here again it is impossible to make a rule, for the terms nowadays are very loosely applied, even by the sailor himself.

(vii) Ashley himself did not make the suggested distinction in many cases. He referred to "Snug Half Hitches" and described all of the structures below as Half Hitches (#1012, 1147, 1152, 1459-60, 1474/1477, 1516, 1681, 1733/1747, 1986, 2490, 2492-3, 2497, 3093, 3450).



Ashley (1944)
"Half Hitches"

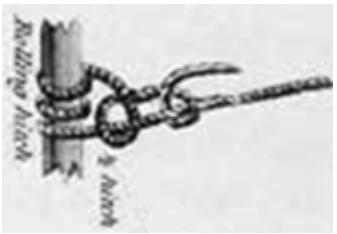
Subsequent authorities have recognised these difficulties, and generally not adopted the suggested distinction (it is revealing to see how they handle kellick / timber hitches, rolling hitches and sheepshanks). Given these difficulties, it is unsurprising that the distinction was not made by Ashley's contemporaries (Verrill, 1917, Day 1935, Graumont & Hensel 1939-52, Svennson 1940, Macfarlan 1947). Day (1947) attributed the distinction to Ashley (1944) and noted some of the difficulties. The distinction was not made historically; eg (quoting with **bold** for emphasis and highlighted interpretations):

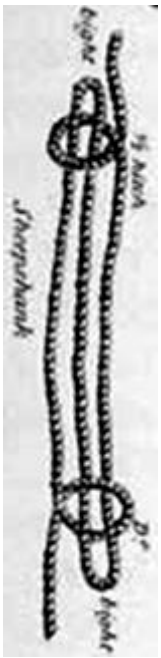
Falconer 1769 (knots not illustrated)

HITCH, *clef*, a ſort of knot or nooſe, by which one rope is faſtened to another, or to ſome other object, as a poſt, ring, timber-head, maſt, &c. Hence we ſay an **half-hitch**, *demi-clef*, a clove-hitch, a rolling-hitch, &c.

Demi-clef, **half-hitch on a rope, &c**. So it was not necessarily on a rope, let alone necessarily on the standing part of the same rope. For a modern illustration, see https://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/demi-clef.

Steel 1794





p182. **HALF-HITCH**. Pass the end of a rope **over the standing part**, and through the bight, and lay it up to the standing part; and repeat it for **two half hitches**.

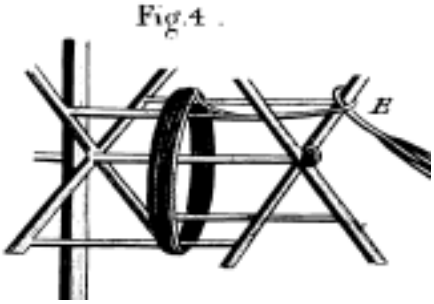
BUT:

p182. ROLLING-HITCH. (A name used for a different knot today). Take two round turns round a mast, &c. and make two **half hitches on the standing part**. Why specify "on the standing part" if the term 'half hitch' could **only** mean "on the standing part"? In other uses by Steel (1794), it clearly did not mean this:

p182. **CLOVE-HITCH is two half-hitches**, one at the back of the other, made by the ratlings **round the shrouds**, and by buoy ropes **round anchors**.

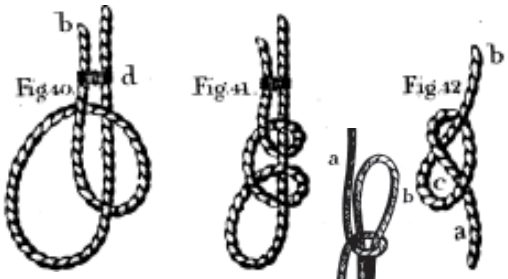
p184. SHEEP-SHANK is made to shorten backstays, &c. by bending part of the backstay, &c. three parts, and taking **a half hitch over the bights**.

Lever 1808



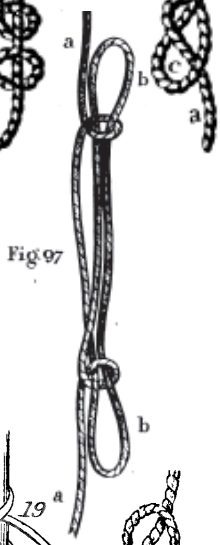
p2.
… These are fastened by their ends to a kind of reel called a Spun-yarn Winch, Fig. 4, and **a half-hitch is taken over one of the spokes, E**. A very telling Fig.

p7.
HITCHING A ROPE, Fig. 40, Is performed thus:—Pass the end of a rope (b) round the standing part; bring it up through the bight, and seize it to the standing part at (d). This is called **a Half-hitch**. Two of these, one above the other, Fig. 41, is called a **Clove-hitch**.



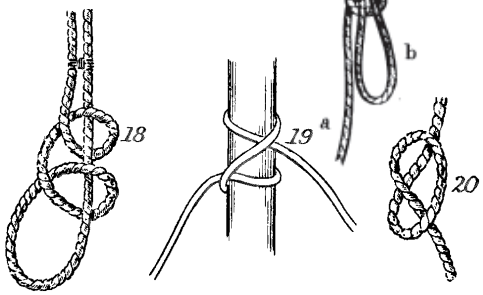
To Make an **OVER-HAND KNOT**, Fig. 42. Pass the end of a rope (b) over the standing part (a) and through the bight above (c).

p12.
A SHEEP SHANK, Fig. 97, Is made for shortening a back-stay, &c. —**a half-hitch is taken with the standing parts (a) round the bights (b)**, when it will appear like the Figure.



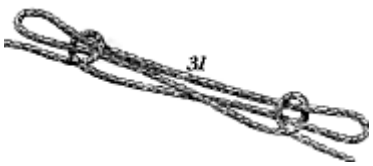
Dana 1841

p39-42.
Two Half-hitches. (18) Pass the end of a rope **round the standing part** and bring it up through the bight. This is a half-hitch. Take it round again in the same manner for two half-hitches.



A **Clove-hitch** (19) is made by passing the end of a rope round a spar, over, and bringing it under and round behind its standing part, over the spar again, and up through its own part. It may then, if necessary, be stopped or hitched to its own part: the only difference between two half-hitches and a clove-hitch being that one is hitched round its own standing part, and the other is hitched **round a spar or another rope**.

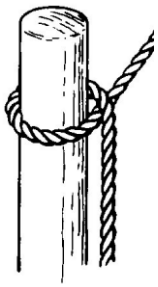
An **Overhand Knot**. (20) Pass the end of a rope over the standing part, and through the bight. Sharp-eyed readers will notice the error of illustration.



A Sheep-shank. (31) Make two long bights in a rope, which shall overlay one another. Take **a half-hitch over the end of each bight with the standing part** which is next to it.

Early publications commonly sought to provide tying instructions rather than definitions. A structure was typically described by illustration or instructions for tying of the simplest or common use; with other versions shown later, if at all. It seems clear from these historical accounts that sailors and knotting authorities well understood that the half hitch structure could be, but need not be, around the standing part of the rope. It could be combined: (i) with itself (for a clove hitch, or in half hitching to secure sails); and (ii) with other knotting elements such as bights, to make structures such as eye knots (for mooring) and sheepshanks (for temporarily shortening lines). It seems that some of these were so common that the term **'half hitch' was also used in some (English-speaking) traditions as shorthand for several compound structures, in different contexts** (like mooring a ship vs lacing a sail) that precluded ambiguity. Such extreme shorthand names were not used in all countries; eg Svensson (1940, Fig. 69) describes the structure in *ABOK* #1780, translated as "a half-hitch around its own part and seizing".

If one wants an unambiguous verbal definition, this will suffice: A **half hitch** is a *turn* of *cordage* around a solid, with the *turn* arranged to confer some *nip* on itself. The underlying solid may eg be a spar, a *line* (including another part of the same *line*), or several *lines* (IGKT Glossary, 2019).



Admiralty "Half Hitch"

By this definition, all of the images in the figure at the start of this article, and all of those shown from Ashley (1944), are indeed half hitches (or loose precursors). The British *Admiralty Manual of Seamanship* has illustrated and used the term 'half hitch' in this broad sense, as a knotting element, from 1908 until the present (see Appendix). Earlier Admiralty Manuals (*for Boys*) from 1867-1905, and the US Navy *Bluejacket's Manual* (1902-44 examined), used the name for both forms in compound knots, as in earlier manuals such as Steel (1794) or Luce (1863). The Royal Canadian Navy *Seaman's Handbook* (1960) provided unambiguous guidance (in Figure 7-27) that the same name applies to the same structure used in various ways.

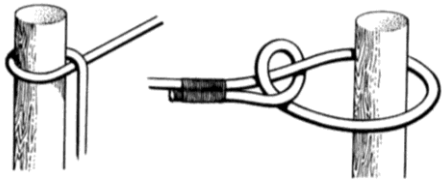


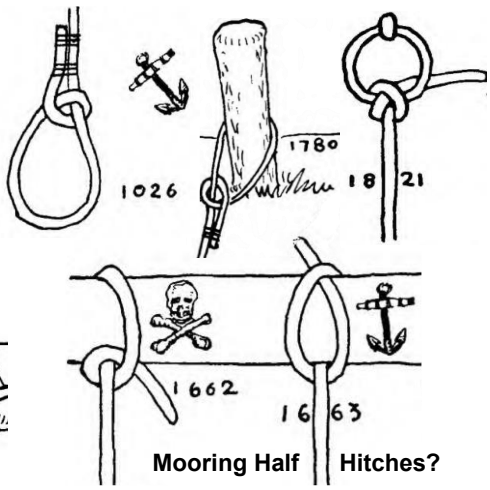
Figure 7-27 Half Hitches

Canadian Navy "Half Hitches"

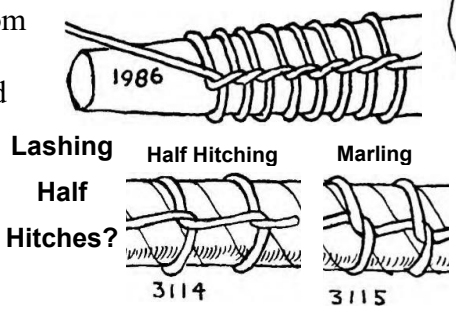
Of course, any hitch may be tied around any solid, including its own standing part. Some may consider that it is useful to have names that distinguish those tied **around their own standing part** from the same structures tied **around another solid**, in case the context does not make the intent clear. Indeed there are distinguishing names for structures including half hitches used in other ways, such as on a becket, or on a hook. But it is bound to cause confusion if the name of a common knotting structure (a half hitch) is taken for **restricted** use in reference to a combination, with some other knotting structure such as a bight or a U-turn, so that the half-hitch structure is formed around the standing part (stand) entering the resulting compound knot.

Such confusion already exists (further examples are given in the IGKT glossary, 2019). Nevertheless, we should aim to reduce confusion, rather than perpetuate or increase it. The **restriction** may be a matter of preference or convenience in some spheres; but it is <u>not</u> the historic use, and it is <u>not</u> generally accepted as established in recent use. Nor is it necessary for the achievement of a distinction between knotting forms. The logical conclusion is that usage based on this **restriction** should be discouraged.

Instead of taking the shorthand used by some sailors for "the half hitch combined with other knotting structures and used in mooring", as the **sole** meaning of the term half hitch (which even English-speaking sailors in general have never done), it seems preferable to coin another term for the compound structures of interest. For example, if "bight with a half hitch around the stand, and end seized to the stand" is too long-winded for *ABOK* #1026; or "U-turn with a half hitch around the stand" is too long-winded for *ABOK* #1662-3, 1780, 1821; why not call them (± seized) "**mooring half hitches**", as distinct from "**lashing half hitches**" (*ABOK* #1986, 3114)?

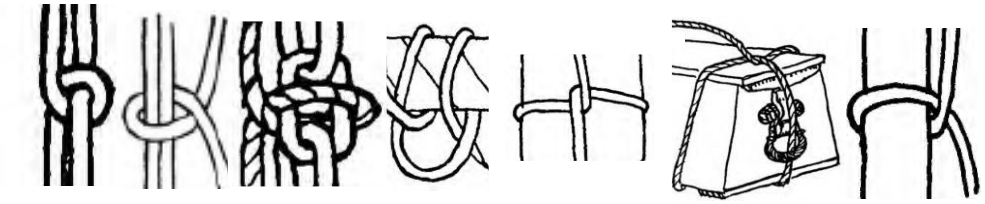


Dealing with the same issue, Casati (2013) distinguished "pure Half Hitches" from "Plain Knots" formed when a half hitch is tied (around its own stand) at the end of a loop (or U-turn or bight).



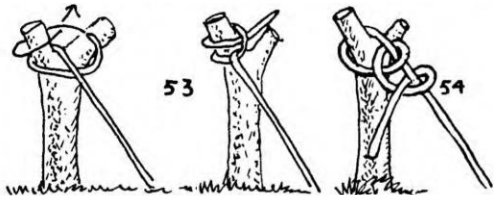
This approach has the great advantage of allowing concise and unambiguous use of the term "**half hitch**" for a common structural element used in knotting (including the above compound formations); a use that we have seen is long established for this term in English (and for the equivalent "**demi-clef**" in French).

https://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/demi-clef



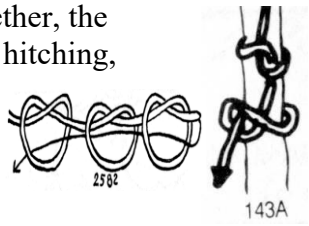
Half Hitches around various solids (illustrations from Ashley 1944)

Ashley (1944) followed Dana (1841), but not other authorities, in distinguishing the **Clove Hitch** (#53) tied around another object from **Two Half Hitches** (#54) where the same structure is tied around its own standing part. As an example of contrasting usage, Svensson (1940, Fig. 63) describes the structure in *ABOK* #54, translated as "a clove hitch round the standing part".



For teaching and learning, it seems best to acknowledge that (with turns of the same chirality) **these terms are synonyms for the same structure**; "clove hitch" being applied more often when the structure is around any solid other than the standing part of a line entering a knot.

As an aside, when a parcel is tied using one hitch (dare I say a single hitch?) as in *ABOK* #2094, it is impossible to see from the 'front' if this is a **half hitch** or a **marling (marline) hitch**, as one is simply the other viewed from 90°. The difference is important when multiple hitches are used, as in *ABOK* #2074 (where two half hitches around another solid are unlikely to be called a clove hitch) vs *ABOK* #2075. The rope between adjacent hitches lies over the cross turns that bind the underlying solid in half hitching (*ABOK* #3114), but under these turns in marling (*ABOK* #3115). Marling is slightly more difficult to reeve and remove (like a series of thumb knots). But see the better tying method in Warner #143A, and the quick method to untie in *ABOK* #2582. Marling is more compact and secure in some applications, especially in bindings where the hitches are separated. When the hitches are close together, the angle between them is more readily adjusted in the common form of half hitching, which is therefore preferred for functional or decorative reasons in uses such as French whipping, ringbolt hitching and several macramé bars.



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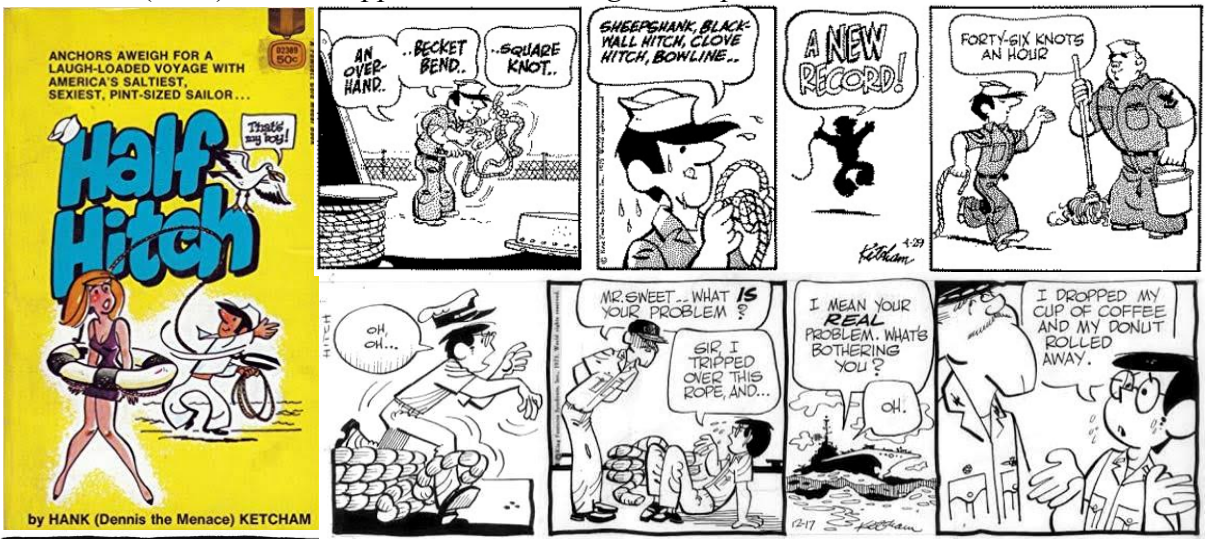


"It was beautiful to watch! Donnie shoots in, ties up the guy in a square knot and pins him to the mat! ... Or maybe it was a half-hitch. Whatever!"

Thanks to:

1. Ruth from Global Village Books for checking details in historic books without charge (and her book prices are low).

2. Hank Ketcham for creating the Half Hitch comic strip character, even including ropes and knots a few times.

3. Steve Moore for thinking about wrestling snakes, with complete irreverence for the names of knots.

Actually it looks like a double overhand knot, with slight errors of illustration. Whatever!

Appendix (from the British *Admiralty Manual of Seamanship,* 1937)

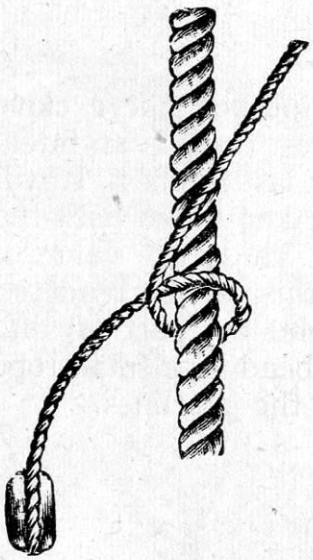
CHAPTER III.

PART I.

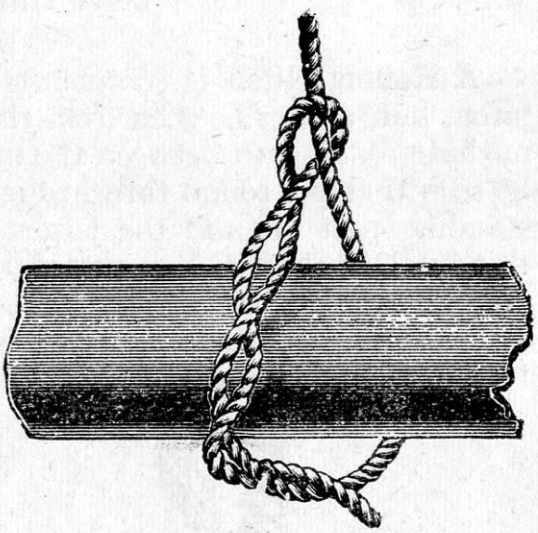
BENDS AND HITCHES.

A Half Hitch is generally used in conjunction with other hitches. Its formation is easily seen from the diagram.

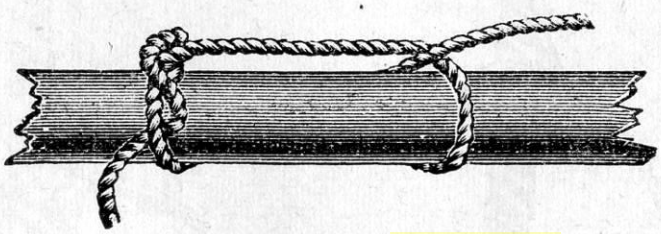
A Timber Hitch is for securing the end of a rope to a spar, also for bending a rope round light cases, bales, &c., when provisioning ship; formed by making a half hitch with rather a long end and expanding the end back with the lay round its own part. Used also with a half hitch for towing spars.



Half Hitch.



Timber Hitch.



Timber Hitch and Half Hitch.

While the content of the *Manual* (1908-2015) has evolved, from how to sling a canvas hammock to how to berth a nuclear submarine, the half hitch has remained relevant and consistently defined / illustrated.