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Dana King. William Lanson.
Bronze 7 ft. Farmington Canal. 2020.
Commissioned by: Amistad Committee,
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Site Projects is a 501.C.3 public art commissioning organization established in New Haven in 2004.
www.siteprojects.org www.artsitesnewhaven.com

FOOTNOTES AND SOURCES

1 Hinks, Peter. "This Beautiful and Rapidly Improving Section of Our City": Race, Labor, and Colonizationists in Early Industrializing New Haven. 1800-1830.

2 Harris, Katherine. William Lanson: Triumph and Tragedy: Entrepreneur. Political and Social Activist. Black King. Contractor on Long Wharf and the Farmington Canal Projects. New Haven: Amistad Committee. 2010.

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*William Lanson's Book of Satisfaction. 1848

**Johnson, James Weldon and J.Rosamond Johnson. "Lift Every Voice and Sing. 1900.

"Negro National Anthem"

WILLIAM LANSON

The Story of Glory & Tragedy in 19th Century New Haven



Dr. William Lanson

The Colony of New Haven was founded by English Puritans in 1638 in the homeland of the Algonquin-speaking Quinnipiacs, indigenous people whose ancestors had inhabited the southern Connecticut coast since the end of the last Ice Age.

Over the next four centuries, the City was shaped and re-shaped by generations of laborers, inventors and visionaries.

One extraordinary story -- largely forgotten in the history books -- is that of William Lanson, Black Freeman, born west of New Haven in 1782 or 1783. Lanson was many things: a master engineer, a skilled mason and quarryman, a wealthy businessman and a trusted leader in the Black community. Now, almost two centuries after his death, Lanson's infrastructural additions to New Haven and its future economic strength are being understood.

Despite his considerable contributions to New Haven, Lanson suffered a reversal of fortune because of racial animosity from the city's political and financial elite. Social and economic changes that had once boosted him up brought him down.

Lanson's life ended tragically: his reputation in tatters, most of his family members dead. Lanson, in ill-health, alone and penniless, died in the Alms House in 1851.

*"As Providence has smiled on me..."**

Between 1805 and 1807, William Lanson and his family arrived in New Haven and

settled on "Negro Lane" (State Street between Grove and Bradley).

William and his brothers Laban and Abel had developed considerable skill in masonry construction. Here, they established two large stone quarries on the traprock ridges east of the City.

In 1807, Lanson -- then in his early 30s -- purchased some outlying land to create a community for free Blacks. He named it New Guinea. "Soon, houses, tenements and groceries emerged. By 1825, about 150 African Americans lived there."¹ It was visionary thinking and the first planned low-income community in the State. It proved a profitable investment for Lanson.

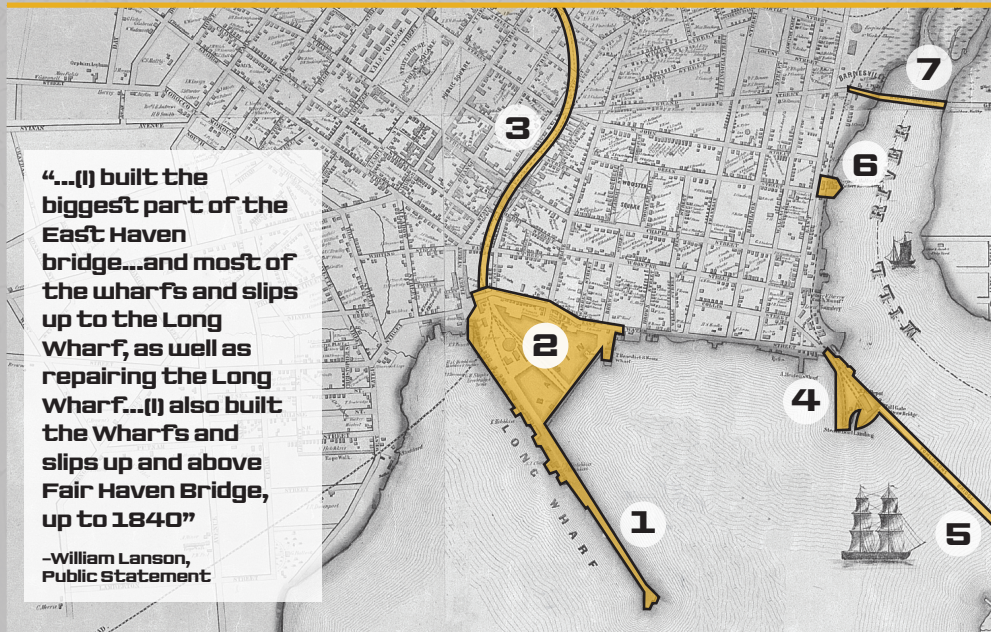
During this time, his masonry business was hired throughout the City, and his work crews provided employment for 20-30 Black workers on every job.

Best known as the man who extended the Long Wharf "when all others had abandoned the idea," Lanson constructed the longest wharf in America, in the years 1810-1812. This monumental infrastructure project made possible a rapid increase in trade and the eventual development of New Haven as an industrial powerhouse in 19th century America.

In 1825 Lanson was hired to build the retaining walls of the Farmington Canal as it was dug through New Haven down to the harbor and into the Canal Basin where the barges unloaded and reversed course. The Canal was a financial failure.

"...[I] built the biggest part of the East Haven bridge...and most of the wharfs and slips up to the Long Wharf, as well as repairing the Long Wharf...[I] also built the Wharfs and slips up and above Fair Haven Bridge, up to 1840"

-William Lanson, Public Statement



1) Long Wharf 2) Canal Basins 3) Farmington Canal 4) Steamboat Dock 5) Tomlinson Bridge 6) Greene St Wharf 7) Fair Haven Bridge

Lanson paid his workers though he himself was never fully paid.

Crossing the Color Line

Elected New Haven's Black Governor from 1825 to 1828, Lanson was also called King Lanson, a title that carried with it West African traditions and respect in the white community.

In the years 1814 -1830, while continuing to work as a builder, quarryman, and community developer, Lanson became a champion for equality and justice for Black people.

In 1814, Lanson and another Black Freeman submitted a petition to the General Assembly requesting voting rights for 'men of color.' They paid taxes so they should have representation as guaranteed in the Constitution. The

petition was denied. "This petition was the first in a series of protest petitions from Black men and women in Connecticut."²

In 1831, a small group including Lanson proposed the establishment of a 'Negro College' in New Haven. White elites believed that a Black College would "disgrace" Yale, and therefore, it was voted down in a city referendum: 700 to 4.

In 1838, the Black community petitioned the General Assembly to require jury trials for individuals fleeing slavery before they could be returned to their enslavers. That petition also was denied.

Evidence exists that Lanson and his brothers were actively involved in assisting people escaping slavery. He was publicly accused of employing or harboring "fugitives."

"Obliged to Shoulder All the Sins"*

Along Water Street, two blocks south of New Guinea, manufacturing developed alongside the existing maritime economy (eventually eclipsing it). In 1810, James Brewster moved his carriage factory to Water Street, putting pressure on New Guinea. In a campaign of character assassination against the Black residents whose neighborhood hindered profitable developments, a local newspaper disparaged his community as "a calamity." Lanson vigorously defended the residents of New Guinea, but was forced to sell his property to white developers in the name of municipal "progress."

By 1830, Lanson moved his community to the end of Greene Street on the Mill River. He converted an abandoned slaughterhouse into a hostelry named the Liberian Hotel. Nearby barns and sheds were developed into stores, a larger barn, and a livery stable. A wharf was built on the river.

"Weary years and silent tears..."**

By the 1830s, the backlash against Black people grew. 'Mob violence and racial attacks' on African Americans occurred with great frequency throughout the US.³

From 1830 to 1843, Lanson was repeatedly fined and arrested on dubious charges. Anti-Black sentiment continued to build.

Some white people advocated for an end to slavery, but believed that Blacks should remain under white control. Some Christians' greatest fear was the 'sinful'

mixing of races. The American Colonization Society's (1817 - 1867 active years. Dissolved 1964) goal was to ship all African Americans back to the west coast of Africa. In the 1830s, the society was attacked by abolitionists as being a slaveholder's program. White Supremacists rallied supporters claiming the presence of Black people caused white poverty.

Blacks were further segregated and opportunities for work were shut down.

"I have met with so many losses..."*

In 1842, William Lanson declared bankruptcy: "...This was about the time it was so fashionable to take benefit of the bankrupt act and I was urged ... to do so...and lost the whole of my property."

On November 18, 1843, the Liberian Hotel burned to the ground. Firefighters did not attempt to stop the blaze.

In the same year, Lanson was injured in a fall. His six months' recovery prevented him from speaking out in his own defense and confronting his accusers. With no income or property, Lanson was forced to move into the Alms House.



**Death Registry: May 29, 1851.
William Lanson. Colored Man. Married.
Cause of death gangrene.
Buried Alms House Cemetery.**

**Grave marked by sticks forming a cross,
its location lost to history.**