

Conversations on...

William Lanson

Improver and Civic Leader

New Haven, 1782 - 1851

Narrator:

In the fall of 2020, the City of New Haven received two public artworks dedicated to the legacy of William Lanson, a 19th century black community leader responsible for many positive contributions to the city. William Lanson was many things: a master engineer, a skilled mason and quarryman, a wealthy businessman, and a trusted leader in the black community. He is most known for the building of the Long Wharf extension in 1810, creating the largest wharf in America at the time. Despite his many improvements to the city's infrastructure and the community, his story has taken nearly two centuries to be publicly recognized.

Luis Chavez-Brumell:

I first heard about William Lanson when I was a child in the 1990's and my mother was going to grad school at Yale, and she was doing research on sociology and the Hill Area and community schools, and through that research she discovered about the "Black King" of New Haven who helped build Long Wharf.

Narrator:

Starting in November of 2020, Site Projects began recording conversations with historians, scholars, community members, and artists to talk about the history of William Lanson. Through these many perspectives, the complex story of Lanson began to emerge.

Joy Burns:

He created and constructed Long Wharf, other people had tried to create it, two men before him and they had failed. He got the stone from East Haven, and I'm just going to read you a bit of a statement that he actually wrote in which he talks about this.

'I felt it my duty to notify the public of my prosperity in life during the first 30 years that I spent in this town. I hope to be excused as I can only give a small hint of my meaning in trying to show what I have done in this place. The actual labor and materials that went through my hands in large jobs of stonework would amount to about \$400,000. I built the biggest part of the East Haven bridge, and the Steamboat Wharfs, and most all the wharfs and slips up to the head of Long Wharf, as well as repairing the Long Wharf. I then built the Basin Wharf, each wall of which is about 2,010 feet in length, 8 feet thick at bottom, 6 at top, and about 8

feet high. The large stones used in building it, I got out of the solid rock in East Haven. I lost, in building this wharf, \$2,600 at least, but I did not mention this to the contractors, as I think too much of a bargain to whine at all. I also built all the wharfs and slips, up above the Fair Haven bridge, up to 1840.'

And so, we don't know much about William Lanson's early life. In all of the statements that he wrote, what I just read from was the "Statement of Facts" and there's a copy of it in the New Haven Museum, he didn't talk about his early life. He didn't talk about where he grew up, he didn't talk about how he learned to read and write, how he learned to express himself. I like to think he was a sponge, and that he managed to be in the company of the right people at the right times in his life, and they taught him all these skills, and he knew how to work it, he knew how to use them.

Joe Taylor:

And so now, William Lanson is one of my heroes. New Haven was a small, podunk town with a university. The wharf had to be extended because there was no way to get out there.

Bruce Clouette:

You wanted to bring ships as close to the commercial port of New Haven as possible, and yet mother nature just kept that harbor silting up, silting up, silting up, and you go further and further out. They build the long wharf in several stages, and then they build this sort of freestanding pier so boats, way way out, can drop stuff there and then smaller boats can bring it wherever it needed to be. Those were called "lighters." They took the cargo from big ships and brought it further to shore. And then around 1810, the company that ran the wharf, the Union Wharf Company, decided that this is ridiculous, we gotta unload those ships way out there... let's build the wharf out there.

Joe Taylor:

What happened when the wharf was extended 1,500 feet out to where those ships could come in, it changed this town from a mercantile town to an industrial giant, which lasted for 150 years. His development of Long Wharf was pivotal in helping this town.

Errol Saunders:

William Lanson's engineering genius is what allows the Long Wharf to be built, William Lanson's engineering genius is what allows the Farmington Canal and then therefore the Farmington Railroad to be built and to connect New Haven to internal New England. William Lanson's genius is what puts New Haven on the map as a commercial powerhouse and serves as the foundation of New Haven's connection to the rest of New England when it becomes an industrial city.

Charles Warner, Jr:

It also brought a lot of life, a lot of business life around where the ships docked. That one act increased business activity all over the area.

Joy Burns:

Building the wharf made it such that the carriage trade had taken off, and also the clock makers were able to get their wares out throughout the country and even into international ports.

Charles Warner, Jr:

And we also didn't mention too that his work on the Farmington Canal made it possible for trade up and down the State and to connecting states. So not just in New Haven Harbor but with the Canal— up and down the State.

Laura Macaluso:

For a small state, Connecticut was considered a powerhouse of invention. And this was talked about by the WPA writers— and those are the folks in the 1930s who are writing these very good, even though now they are outdated, but solid state histories. The WPA writers wrote *'from the time the Patent Office opened in 1790,'* and that's the patent office in Washington DC, *'Connecticut inventors have led those of other states in number of patents in proportion to population.'* So Connecticut is a powerhouse of invention and industry, and New Haven is representative of the same.

So in New Haven, this 'inventing disease' was celebrated above all in the figure of Eli Whitney, of course, who founded the Whitneyville Factory and the housing complex on the Mill River at the base of East Rock. If you visit Eli Whitney's grave site in Grove St. Cemetery, this is a very big public monument that anyone can go see, you can walk through the gates, it's open, people can read this and understand Eli Whitney's place as the cotton gin founder, as the patron, and as the improver of society. He just becomes this name that you refer to, and maybe this place over on the Mill River, and we've got these ghosts of buildings over there... but who really knows Eli Whitney anymore as a civic leader? He's painted as that, he paints it on his own tomb like that, but is it really coming from him and his family, or is it coming from New Haveners who really need that identity, that leadership, as someone to turn to and say 'Look at us! Look at our little port town— we can compete on the national stage, we produced a man like Eli Whitney who changed the world.'?

Eli Whitney's place in New Haven, which I believe is probably half crafted by New Haveners themselves, was this opening for men of this industrial inventing class to raise themselves up in political ways and gain power, and be a part of the power structure. So

people like Chauncey Jerome on the left, a clockmaker, Joseph Sargent, hardware, and on the right Hobart Bigelow, who runs a steam boiler company. So these are white men who are able to get into a different social class through becoming leaders of the city, and they can retain, though, their working, laborist, identities. So in New Haven that's ok, but we know from listening today, that it wasn't ok for a black man like William Lanson to be able to claim any piece of that. Right? He could never become a part of this. It's in paint on canvas hanging in our own City Hall, that men who don't look like these men can't be a part of that. Who gets to be a Yankee Inventive Genius? And why is William Lanson not part of this idea?

Narrator:

While only a small number of white men were publically celebrated as New Haven's civic leaders and improvers, Lanson was part of a larger network working to change the lives of citizens across the city, especially in regard to the black community— those who were free, and those who were still enslaved.

Dana King:

I wonder who he got to sit and talk with about things like that. Who were his people where he could have these conversations with and maybe throw ideas around with?

Charles Warner, Jr:

He was definitely a part of a network of men and women who were interested in the development and growth of their people, and not just locally, but that network was a regional and a national, in terms of black people who were free, he was part of a larger network.

Errol Saunders:

These were not poor podunk people. These were sophisticated urbanites with a fair amount of disposable income they are investing in their own community, whether or not you describe that community as New Haven writ large, or New Haven's free black and enslaved black populations. They are investing money in themselves and in the community.

Charles Warner Jr:

The Reverend Simeon Jocelyn was a special and intrepid character who was a young theological student at Yale who felt it was his Christian duty to tend to the moral development of New Haven's mistreated African American population. Rev. Jocelyn, along with a group of black leaders from the New Haven community, got together and formed the African Ecclesiastical Society. The Dixwell Church has records indicating that the first meeting was February 8th, 1820, and William Lanson was a founding

member of the African Ecclesiastical Society. And one thing that William Lanson, you know, he was involved very closely with the Abolitionists, specifically Simeon Jocelyn. In his own housing development, he would receive fugitive slaves or people who didn't have a home, and a lot of times when they were ill or about to die, he would send for Simeon Jocelyn who would come and pray with them. What I do know from the history of the Dixwell Congregational Church, is that it started from a group spearheaded for sure by Simeon Jocelyn, but comprised of local African American men who I suppose were in some way or another considered leaders in the community for whatever reason, and William Lanson was among that group. The kind of work they were doing, it was definitely in line with dealing with the issue of slavery and dealing with people who were on the move from the South coming to New Haven. And if you think about William Lanson's work on the Farmington Canal, he would definitely know waterways.

Aaron Goode:

I think if you look at the Farmington Canal, that was actually financed, I think, a lot of the financing came from people who were Quakers. Not all of it, but a fairly substantial percentage for both the Erie Canal in New York and the Farmington Canal here was from people who would have identified as abolitionists, many of whom were wealthy Quakers. And I think that brings you into this connection with the Underground Railroad, abolition of slaves, and things like that. That's certainly true for the Erie Canal, and I believe it's also true for the Farmington Canal.

Charles Warner Jr:

One of the things that's not really stated, is that part of the animus towards William Lanson had to do with him representing this idea of free blacks at a time that was possibly scary due to Nat Turner's Rebellion, but I do think there were more specific reasons why William Lanson was targeted, and I think it had to do with dealing with fugitives.

Christine Pittsley:

All of these connections, and as I go through the early New Haven records, there are so many people coming to New Haven from other places that... you know there are people passing through his community that I cannot imagine he did not have a larger part in this Underground Railroad movement than anyone has ever given his credit for. The more we look at it, the more you see the agency that this community took to not only free themselves but free others in their community.

Joy Burns:

Lanson was always petitioning the Connecticut legislator about one thing or another. Whether that had to do with fugitive slaves, the gradual emancipation, the place of free

blacks, repealing Black Codes... he was bold and he challenged them and he was in their face.

Charles Warner, Jr:

As early as 1814, he and another leader from the black community, Bias Stanley, petitioned the legislator to absolve free property owning black men from paying taxes since they couldn't vote. William Lanson's father was a Revolutionary War Veteran, and a man who was amongst the community of African American Revolutionary War veterans. So if your father gave his life to establish this nation under the mantra of "no taxation without representation" it's clear that when he comes along in 1814 and decides to gather with Bias Stanley, that this was a person who was demanding this because he understood the price that was paid to have it. And his father contributed just as much to the foundation of this nation, and he was aware he was being cheated and had the fortitude to address the State Assembly about it and make change. Frederick Douglas was also a friend and then eventually a colleague of Ebenezer D. Bassett, who was a close relative of William Lanson, and a member of the Temple Street Church. Sometimes I think with black figures, especially, like William Lanson, there seems to be this... like he was larger than life. But I think it's important that we understand there was a whole community of people before him, with him, and after, who contributed to the history and development of this country. So William Lanson did more than build bridges and structures, he was a direct influence in building a community.

Narrator:

In 1831, a small group including Lanson proposed the establishment of a 'Negro College' in New Haven.

Charles Warner, Jr:

So basically what happened was, the group of colored men had been meeting to discuss the future of black people in the nation. And somehow Simeon Jocelyn ended up attending.

Robert Gibson:

Simeon Jocelyn, he was one of the persons who had the idea, and he joined up with William Lloyd Garrison and they decided that rather than these white men making a decision about what should be done about furthering black education, they traveled to Philadelphia to meet with a convention of free black men, I'm not sure if any women were present, but they consulted with this black group in Philadelphia about what to do. And so they cooperated with them and proposals were made, and those were the proposals for a 'Negro College' in New Haven in 1831, that were ultimately rejected by the city government. It was never built. It was never set up, it was never started. They

did have a location, I believe someone donated some land for it, but the final decision about whether the school would be allowed to become a reality in New Haven, they had to get the approval of the town leaders. And for various racist reasons, the town leaders and the town... it was a town vote, and they rejected the idea of having a 'Negro College' in New Haven. They felt it would have an impact on real estate values to have a hoard of black people coming into the city, and they thought that the Southerners who were sending their children to Yale would be offended by having a 'Negro College' in the city. And also, there was, that same year, Nat Turner's Rebellion occurred, that spread a great deal of fear and fear-mongering, New haven not being any exception. And so, sadly, an effort that was made to improve the lives of black men was rejected by people who felt the reason why black men shouldn't have equal rights and opportunities was because they were not an educated group. Here was a school that was going to be established to help provide for training for, I say black men, I'm sure that was meant to be the focus. It was not anything to compete with Yale, it was going to provide for education and basically career training in various vocational areas.

Aaron Goode:

As Robert just said, there was a referendum in the city on the college, and the results of the referendum were I think 700 to 4, or something like that. Just a complete rejection of this idea, and it almost seems like the vote was rigged, because there were more than 4 free black voters in New Haven, so I'm not even sure those results can be trusted, but that is what's recorded. There's a letter from William Lloyd Garrison, I think it's to Arthur Tappan, while they are trying to organize the college, and Garrison says 'We should do this in New Haven because there's less racism in New Haven than just about anywhere else!' That turned out to be completely wrong.

Robert Forbes:

It tells you something that all of those people who knew a lot about New Haven's politics and sociology thought that this was gonna fly. And the huge backlash that hit when it was proposed, I think was really reflective of the nationalization of politics at this time. There were a number of people like David Daggett, the dean of the law school who jumped on a national bandwagon and utilized hostility and anger about the college in a sense to promote his own political agenda and transition from a Federalist, hated after the Hartford Convention, to a Jacksonian Democrat.

Charles Warner, Jr:

Mr. Forbes, you also made a good point about Nat Turner's Rebellion, well if that happening in 1831 and then the school idea coming in 1832, there's definitely more reason not to have this outpost of blacks in New Haven coming from the South, from here, from the Caribbean as planned.

Robert Forbes:

And there's at least one headline in the New Haven paper that has those two stories side by side, so you've hit the nail on the head there.

Narrator:

As Lanson's successes grew, he faced increasing persecution, defamation, and dubious arrests. People who once celebrated his contributions to New Haven's infrastructure began labeling him as a purveyor of vice. This sudden change in attitude toward Lanson lacks clear justification in the historical records. However, understanding Lanson's involvement in justice movements, as well as understanding broader social and economic shifts, can begin to give us some perspective on why this defamation occurred.

Aaron Goode:

You know there's a lot of evidence that Lanson is targeted for political and economic persecution by the political and economic elite in New Haven, but there are other ways in which he is a victim of certain larger forces or trends in the economic development of New Haven. We have the numbers of free blacks in New Haven in this whole period, and it goes from, in 1790 it's a small number, I think under 100, and then it grows and grows. And so by 1820 it's about 500, and then by 1850 it's 1,000. But yeah, the free black population is really growing by leaps and bounds throughout this period.

Robert Gibson:

As more black people move into the city, as in any location in America, the response to increased presence of blacks in the community posed serious problems to many people that resulted in racist action and reaction.

Robert Forbes:

There's a conjunction of a couple of things. The racial mixing that's going on, the amalgamation that's going on, is in the lower classes, in and around Lanson's properties, the bar that gets raided. It's sort of a conjunction of interests, of the people who see their status as threatened by this, and the people who are able to mobilize that class. And the reason why these people are doing this is because they are a part of an insurgency against the Federalist elite who have been running things for all these decades. The white folk are no longer seeing serving in indenture as a socially acceptable thing... they're not having any of that anymore. They're not willing to participate in any kind of deferential relationship with people who consider themselves their betters. That's done. So it becomes a badge of subordination, if not inferiority, to be in that kind of relationship. And they need to distinguish themselves from those people.

The Democratic politicians, the Tolerationists in Connecticut, are manipulating that, especially the immigrants, by clearly painting the people they are recruiting as whites, and as better than the people who they live with and drink with and fornicate with... They are not supposed to do that anymore because you are white. You're lowering yourself if you do that.

Aaron Goode:

That becomes an impetus for the white anglo-saxon protestant elite to try and play some of these lower status, lower class groups against each other. And so that gives a boost to some of the racist ideology in that period right before the episode with the black college, and right before you see the persecution of Lanson.

Robert Forbes:

They kind of push him out of the stuff they set him up in, and they don't come to his aid when he needs it the most.

Errol Saunders:

One of the things that's really interesting about William Lanson is that he dies almost penniless. But you know, this is a classic African American story of success. In the case of William Lanson, William Lanson is building his communities and making his money in land that becomes very valuable because of what he did with it. So Wooster Square was not even considered to be a great place to put something, or anything for that matter. And so, the free blacks got to live there. And the hotel for people going up and down the Post Road got to go there. But once you put in the Long Wharf, it becomes a very popular place for sea captains to want to live. The city decides to create the new township there, they plot a square, and it turns out that William Lanson gets in the way, the things he's doing are simply in the way of 'higher uses' of the land.

And so, if you believe William Lanson and the pamphlets he has printed about what he's doing, he's framed for a lot of different things because they've taken place on his property, and it's really easy to frame someone who deals only in visitors and travelers through. Or, people like black people, who are perpetually not part of the polity even if they are there and have been since the beginning. And so, in many cases, he goes to court and the court finds him guilty of things that have happened on his properties, and their decision is to relieve him of the "troublesome" properties. So his hotel gets taken away from him. Black people move to a new place, along State St. and Humphrey: Little Liberia. But that too becomes close enough to the railroads that it becomes valuable, so you constantly get to be moved. And so he ends up dying penniless with all of his wealth appropriated by agents of the state. These people cannot vote because their voting rights have been removed from them. There's no question that that helps the

expropriation of their property. Critical race theorists would say, that's not a bug, it's a feature of white supremacy. That systems exist this way so that you can, easily, expropriate the property of people who are different than you.

Dana King:

I think about Tulsa and Black Wall Street, and the ability of a community to build great wealth for black people, and once it gets built to a certain point, everybody wants a piece of it! They may not have been paying attention before, but it draws attention, and that really is what happened with Mr. Lanson. The fact that he lost all of his property... and that's that generational wealth that could have lasted and built so much more, and the loss of that is truly sad, cause it extended well past the end of his life, that harm.

Narrator:

William Lanson played an important role in New Haven's history, yet his story was erased from the broad public memory. Public monuments and historical art helped elevate and preserve certain stories, while excluding others and pushing them to the sidelines. Public art has the power to shape our understanding of the past, and while this formerly has contributed to erasure of New Haven's Black History, it now has the power to center marginalized stories and expand our understanding of who built our city. This becomes our common work moving forward.

Laura Macaluso:

Let me show you where marginalized people do appear in public art. Well, here is an example. Not easy to see. Not easy to view. This is 'Whitney Invents Cotton Gin' mural, by Hugo Ohlms. So this is a very standard scene to which people did not raise an eyebrow towards for a very, very long time. It has taken New Haven a long time to get here, but how brilliant these new works of art are, and how there's work to do, and New Haven is doing it, and it is a big deal to put up a new bronze statue, and to put up a new, elegant, and brilliant mural, and that a lot of communities in the US haven't gotten here yet, they're not doing it. They need to do it, of course, but New Haven has a long history of doing things a certain way and only including certain people in the city's story and the city's sense of self, and by putting these new public works of art up and inserting them into public spaces, the statement is clear, and it's important, and now generations of young people will see these things, and we just have to create the opportunities to see and understand what the old things were about and how they didn't hit the mark. They hit the mark for the time for a certain kind of person and left everyone else out. And now with these new things, the story is so much richer, so much more interesting, and it's just so much better.

Narrator:

In 2020, artist Dana King created a bronze statue of William Lanson for the city of New Haven. This was the first, and only, visual depiction of Lanson himself, as no documentation of his image has been discovered.

Dana King:

Well I dug and investigated as best I could, reached out to people, and came up with nothing. And so I was left with: who was this man? When I realized the only information about his physicality was that he weighed 200 lbs, well what do you do with that? So I envisioned this man who was of good height, 5'11", 6 ft tall at the time, and muscular. And then when I started in on his face, his face came to me so quickly, and it flowed once I started in on it. I looked at photos of African men from that time period, West African men, and just kind of let my vision of who I thought he was as a human being, a man of character and community spirit... I really wanted to vision him, and I'm so glad I did. Because he was his own man, and I didn't want to copy him from anybody, I really needed him to come through to me. And, he did.

To have the story of an African descendant publicly held in our country, when our history is filled with gaping holes in the truth of America and how it came together. And so it's a beautiful way to use art to fill in those gaps. Hopefully it will help people retain more of the story because they are able to see and touch and really commune with that piece. And it goes beyond the written information about that person and that period of time. Because I do see the strand of the work that he did and just the life that he lived. He was a living embodiment of revolution, at that time, and I felt very strongly that if he were alive today that he would join in this revolution. I want children to come up to that sculpture one day and say 'Why is his hand in a fist?,' because he doesn't look angry, he doesn't look like he's going to get into a fight... what's that all about? And to dig and to do their homework, and to try and figure it out.

Jeanette Morrison:

As the alder of the area where William Lanson's statue sits, I am very very proud and honored. I get my energy from him, because when I see him standing so stoic and so proud, it just helps me as a black woman serving as an elected official, and not just an elected official but also a part of leadership as the Vice President to the Board, you deal with a lot. And him as a black man, being one person that might have a little voice, I'm just so encouraged by that. This is proudness, you know? Because I'm a black woman, I'm triple proud. I look at Mr. Lanson, I said when we did the unveiling, that's my father, that's my uncle, that's my brother.

Laura Macaluso:

If New Haven can make a lot of good choices, like erecting a statue of William Lanson, like investing money, basically, in writing history and disseminating history, those are the things that will pull us in the right direction, I'd like to believe. Having that kind of artwork does encourage people or free people to feel that spaces are open for everyone as well. For those of us who believe in public art and public history, education, and public parks and public libraries, these to me are the essential elements to a robust, democratic society in which all voices are heard.

Narrator:

There are still gaps, and many stories waiting to be told. William Lanson is one of these stories, but who else has been obscured from our narratives? Together, we can help to mend these gaps and fill in the broader picture of our past.

Errol Saunders:

You just have to decide what kinds of things are the kinds of stories that need to be told. And for a long time, the stories of people of color, the stories of women, the stories of poor people, were excluded and thought unworthy.

Luis Chavez-Brumell:

I remember in third grade learning about Theophilus Eaton and John Davenport and the building of New Haven and the Green, but didn't have officially in the classroom learning about William Lanson.

Patricia Melton:

Do students know about Lanson? Probably not. And it has to do with probably the lack of diversity in curriculum. It's definitely not formalized in any sort of curriculum, and in fact, the New Haven public schools have just adopted some guidelines to really talk about integrating African American history into their curriculum. That's just something that has just been done recently. As we look, and as lots of things are being challenged around: what are all those voices that are missing, what are all those people, who in fact did contribute to the building of New Haven, in our community, and now we are in a time that's more receptive to embracing all the contributions of what built this city.

Luis Chavez-Brumell:

How do we make sure that we get the Lanson story out there through the art that does exist, that will exist, but also what does it look like to have William Lanson textbooks in schools, or picture books in schools and the library. And we're in a new era to kind of get this story, and others like it, into the public sphere, and to think forward of how do

we make sure, you know history is being made right now, how do we make sure these stories aren't being lost for future generations and the importance of that.