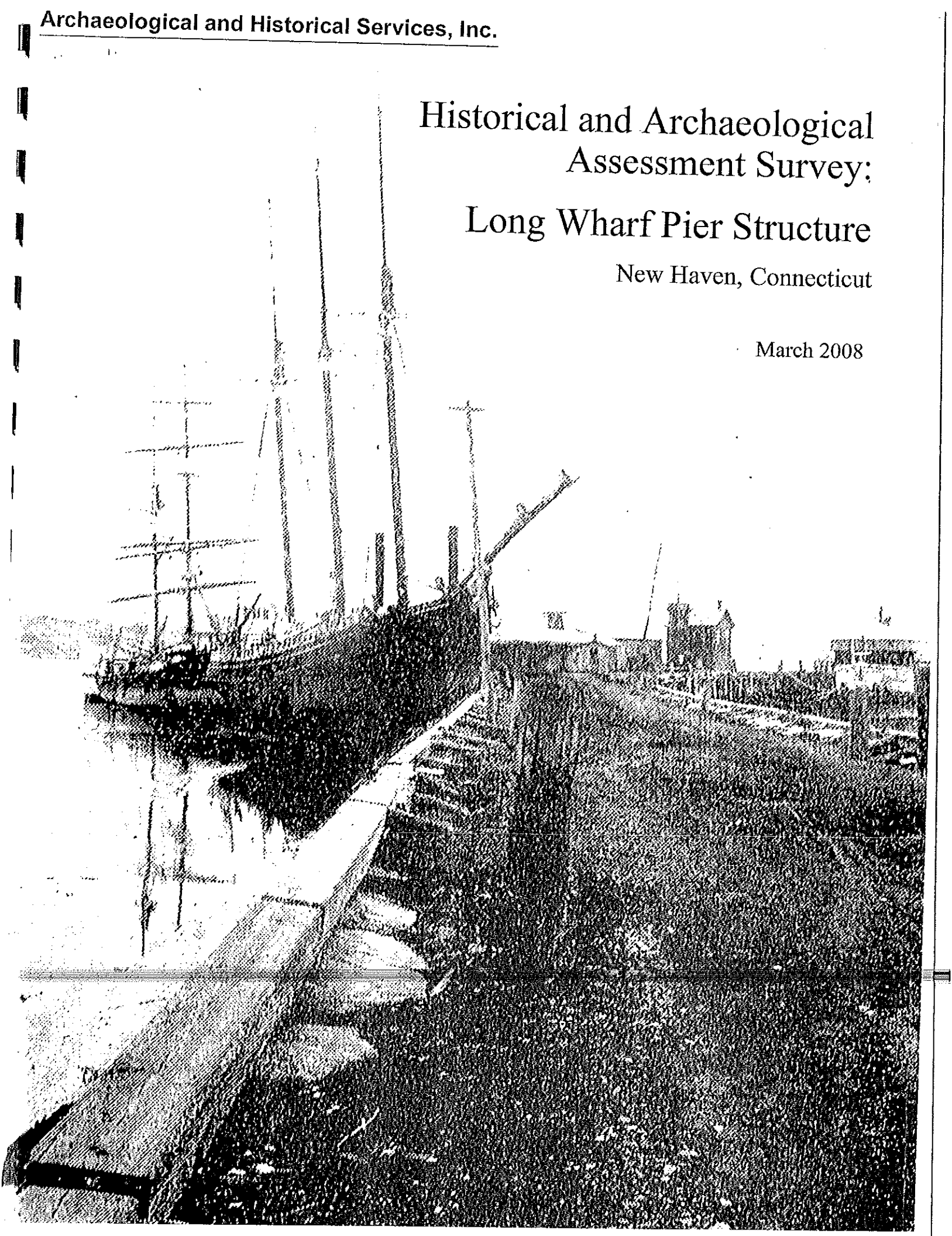


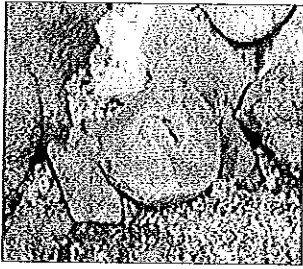
Historical and Archaeological Assessment Survey:

Long Wharf Pier Structure

New Haven, Connecticut

March 2008

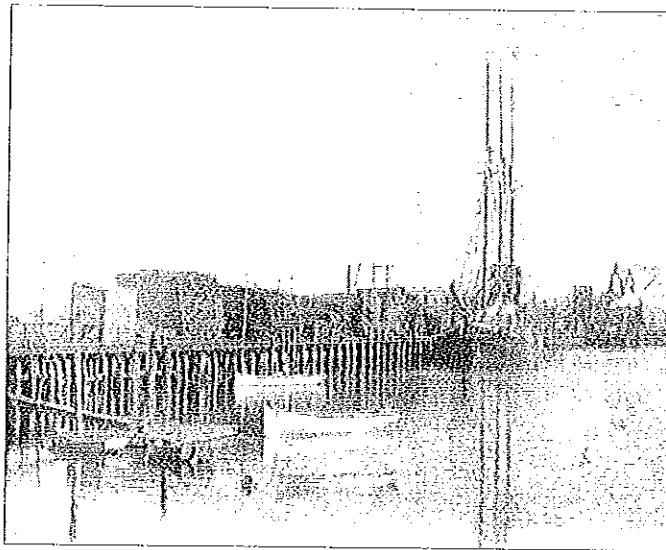




*European flint ballast
cobble from Long Wharf*

Lucia, St. Barts, St. Eustacia, St. Kitts, St. Croix, in fact from almost every island in the West Indies. . . . Wherever New Haven vessels have prosecuted their voyages, almost every port visited has contributed materials that have been used in the construction of this wharf; and probably, by excavating, a greater collection of foreign minerals could be made from this wharf than from any other spot in the United States (Trowbridge 1865: 102).

Other elements of the wharf's construction can be identified by the study of early photographs. An undated photograph, probably c.1875 (Figure 12), shows the edge of the wharf protected by a fender system of closely spaced wooden piles. A remnant of these piles may be what was observed in the field inspection (Photographs 7 and 8). Another view, published in the 1890s but probably taken much earlier, shows the edge of the wharf defined by stout timbers lying atop the stonework (Figure 17 and cover). The timbers were anchored by periodic stout wooden braces set into the wharf's fill.



Long Wharf, ca. 1875 (?).

The surface of the wharf was unpaved, the top of the fill serving as the working surface. Additional piles, probably for mooring, were set into the fill back from the wharf's edge.

In addition to extending the wharf in stone to the pier, the 1810 work also raised up the entire surface of the wharf so that it would be above the highest tide. Previously, the wharf was regularly overtopped by monthly spring tides, leading to an exodus of vermin, known locally as "Rat Days" (Trowbridge 1865: 97, 100). The top courses of the masonry observed in the field inspection do not seem to be quite as high as what the historical photographs show; whether this is due to missing courses of stone or subsidence of the structure could not be determined.

The contractor for the 1810 improvements to Long Wharf was William Lanson (c.1782-1857). Lanson was a prominent and sometimes controversial member of the city's African American community. As a businessman owning several properties, he filed a formal protest with the Connecticut General Assembly when it explicitly denied blacks the right to vote in 1814, and he was one of the founders of New Haven's first black church, the African Ecclesiastical Society, in 1824. Subsequent to his work on the wharf, Lanson undertook some or all of the masonry for the New Haven portions of the New Haven and Northampton Canal, commonly known as the Farmington Canal. Even while continuing his contracting business, Lanson also operated a livery stable and hotel. The latter, the Liberian Hotel, was a source of concern for the more proper elements of New Haven society. Newspaper accounts suggest that the hotel also served as a brothel, but the truth of that claim cannot be ascertained at this time; it may well be that the serving

of alcoholic beverages, general revelry, and the mixing of the races were enough to make many assume the worst. The Liberian Hotel was raided in 1831 and two interracial couples were broken up; the white halves of each, a man and a woman, were arrested (Warner 1940: 28-29).

In 1843, William Lanson suffered two setbacks. On November 23, the Liberian Hotel was burned to the ground by a fire that started in an adjacent barn; the firemen are said to have turned their hoses on the African American women and the children (described as mixed-race) who were fleeing the blaze (*Barre Gazette, Berkshire County Whig* 1848). That same year, Lanson was hurt in a fall, which obliged him to give up his livery stable and stonemason businesses (Lanson 1848: 1). Thereafter, he and his wife Nancy supported themselves by operating a clothing and sewing notions store and taking in boarders. In 1848, a fight between two of his boarders ended in one bludgeoning the other to death, and Lanson was blamed for contributing to the murder. In his defense, he published his side of the story, in which he admitted occasionally serving alcoholic beverages (which he noted was a common practice) but disavowed having any inkling that either man was unruly. Published at his own expense as *William Lanson's Book of Satisfaction*, the booklet included a poem about the murder:

On the twentieth day of April
C. Parkisson was slain
By Samuel C. Yemmans,
From the northward did hail.

He put up at William Lanson's,
Who never saw him before;
He behaved very properly
Until the four days were o'er.

[continuing for 18 more stanzas]

This poetic effort earned Lanson ridicule in the press. The poem was reprinted in its entirety by *The Knickerbocker*, a New York literary magazine, along with arch commentary by the editor in which Lanson's character was impugned. The Brattleboro, Vermont, *Weekly Eagle* picked up the story, adding that such bad poetry would probably prevent future murders at the Lanson establishment. Although he was alive at the time of the U.S. Census of 1850 (no occupation listed), William Lanson probably died sometime thereafter, as he is not listed in the 1860 census.

Against the unfavorable notices that William Lanson received in the press in the latter part of his life, it is worth noting the opinion of his character given by Thomas R. Trowbridge, a New Haven lawyer who may well have known him personally:

He was respected as a man of energy and skill, and he was a useful citizen,
Becoming involved in his latter days, he fell into bad repute, but even then he was
a man receiving considerable respect for his previous worth. He was capable of
great things (Trowbridge 1865: 98).

Because of the expansion, Long Wharf continued to play a central role in the commercial life of the city. At some point, New Haven's federal custom house was located at the north end of the wharf, which became known as Custom House Square. Amos Doolittle's 1824 map of New

Haven shows the wharf crowded with buildings and more than a dozen vessels moored along the east side (Figure 7). In addition to warehouses and stores, the wharf also housed the offices of two insurance companies (see Figure 8). Most of New Haven's vessels in this period were involved in of exporting agricultural products and importing rum, sugar, and molasses from the West Indies and finished goods from Europe, but more than a dozen also engaged in sealing in the South Seas. One or two entrepreneurs attempted whaling, but the lead in this enterprise by New Bedford and New London captains was too great for New Haven interests to gain a foothold. Similarly, New Haven merchants attempted but failed to make substantial inroads into the China trade. Nevertheless, trade with the West Indies, South America, and Europe was more than sufficient to sustain New Haven as a prosperous commercial center. As of 1815, there were 100 merchant vessels registered in New Haven (Trowbridge 1897: 780ff., 813).

New Haven's Long Wharf may be said to literally represent the very definition of a wharf in the early 19th century. Noah Webster (at that time a resident of New Haven) defined "wharf" in his 1828 dictionary as

A perpendicular bank or mound of timber or stone and earth, raised on the shore of a harbor, or extending some distance into the water, for the convenience of lading and unlading ships and other vessels. . . . The two longest wharfs in New England are at Boston and at New Haven. The latter is much the longest, extending into the harbor about three quarter of a mile.

The same geological forces that had necessitated Long Wharf contributed to its near-destruction. On the night of October 26, 1820, a fire broke out on the wharf, and 26 stores and other buildings, along with their contents, were reduced to ashes. Because the tide was out, no water could be obtained for the pumpers, and the flames were left to burned unchecked (Osterweis 1953: 277). The fire was said to have caused many of the city's leading merchants to suspend business and to have reduced others to "a state of necessity and want." The city government sent a circular to other towns in Connecticut and throughout New England asking them to assist New Haven citizens in rebuilding (City of New Haven Mayor's Office 1821).

In the late 1820s, Long Wharf was incorporated into a Farmington Canal structure known as Union Basin, a large area where canal boats could be loaded and unloaded (Figure 8). The canal, which stretched from New Haven all the way to Northampton, Massachusetts, was intended by its proponents, the leading merchants of New Haven, to give the city better access to the products of the New England countryside and divert some of the business that was being captured by Hartford. In New Haven, the canal took over the course of the creek that had been used by the settlement's first shipping, reaching the harbor at the east side of Long Wharf. In order to create the Union Basin, a second wharf, known as Basin Wharf, was built in a diagonal direction from a point about 1,200 feet down from the head of Long Wharf northeasterly to the shore. Because the ~~level of the basin changed with the tides, a lock was provided at the northern end so canal boats~~ could proceed northward at the water level of the canal. (The change in water level in the basin was exploited by a tide-powered mill, probably a gristmill, at the northeast corner of the basin.)

The coming of railroads dramatically changed both the economics of transportation and the actual physical geography of the New Haven waterfront. In the late 1830s, rail lines connected New Haven to both Hartford and New York City, necessitating the use of land close to the waterfront first for tracks and then for all the other infrastructure needed to run a railroad: roundhouses, freight yards, repair shops, and warehouses. The Farmington Canal was converted to