

New Haven
Long Wharf

William Lanson: The Slave Who Helped Build New Haven

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William Lanson was an extraordinary figure in early 19th-century New Haven.

Almost certainly an escaped slave, Lanson overcame incredible odds to become a highly successful businessman, one of the

HERITAGE

earliest black entrepreneurs in Connecticut.

He was an early leader among free blacks and was lauded by the white establishment for his business accomplishments.

It was Lanson who figured out a way to extend the city's wharf far into New Haven

Harbor, facilitating the city's growth as a port when no one else could keep pilings steady in the sand and muck. He amassed an entire neighborhood of businesses and dwellings.

But, the story goes, he somehow morphed into a vice czar, got into legal and financial trouble and lost it all.

His obituary in the New Haven Daily Palladin of May 29, 1851, described him as "a very enterprising Negro, in his early days," who ultimately failed because he was "inherently depraved." He died in the poorhouse.

Peter Hinks, an assistant professor of history at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., who is researching race relations in

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Connecticut between 1750 and 1850, says he is finding a different story.

Lanson's financial ruin, Hinks believes, likely had more to do with how the white middle class regarded and treated him than it did with any real or purported moral failings on Lanson's part.

Lanson's rise and fall must be viewed in the context of Connecticut and northern blacks emerging as a class from slavery, and "the shifting white response to that presence," Hinks said.

"To focus on the factor of vice as the sole cause of his downfall is to play into the hands of those who sought to cartoon Lanson and blacks generally through this opprobrium," Hinks wrote in a recent paper on Lanson.

Working from what original sources he can find, including newspaper accounts, diaries and land records — the paper trail is weak — Hinks is piecing together a new appraisal of Lanson's life, one that suggests that whites after about 1820 seized upon any Lanson misstep as a pretext to harass him.

Amy L. Trout, curator at the New Haven Colony Historical So-

ciet, who also has studied Lanson, said she, too, thinks whites were significant in Lanson's fall.

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mentation other than Lanson's claims — he was constantly harassed by the police. The minute he was released from the police station and got home, he would be arrested for something else," Trout said.

Lanson's early years are not well documented. He was thought to have been born into slavery in the late 1770s, possibly in the

Waterbury area. It appears he was a slave in Southington when he escaped. His adult life in New Haven is better documented, though still sketchy. He was thought to be in his 70s when he died, his reputation in tatters.

Lanson "appears to have been a person who enjoyed a drink, a good card game, a little raucous dancing and an occasional extra-marital affair," Hinks said.

Late in life, Lanson published a "Statement of Facts," in which he complained of being tossed in jail five times in six years for a total of 450 days. The offense typically involved the sale of liquor at his hotel, the Liberian.

Inasmuch as there were 15 other places nearby selling liquor, "I do not think I sold one drink where the rest sold ten," he wrote.

In another statement to the public, Lanson told of five years of unannounced visits by a city inspector, Mr. Knevals, at a rooming house he owned, some of the visits in the middle of the night. Without saying what he was looking for, the inspector would check each room and leave, Lanson said.

"I should think Mr. Knevals had taken lights and looked at my

house in the night season more times than I have hairs on the top of my head," Lanson said.

Finally one night Knevals arrived and found a sailor in bed with a woman guest whom Lanson had taken in because she was unemployed — after clearing it with police. Two days later, the authorities pressed charges.

Up From Slavery, And Down

Until the 1820s, when changing conditions and attitudes appear to have worked against Lanson, he was successful beyond any expectation for a black man at the time, especially one who apparently had just escaped from slavery.

Hinks this summer discovered in the Dec. 5, 1799, edition of a newspaper called the Connecticut Journal an ad dated at Southington in which Solomon Fisk offered a \$10 reward for the return of a runaway "Negro servant" named Lanson.

Little more than a decade later, Timothy Dwight, a Yale president and backbone of the establishment, said Lanson's work on the wharf was proof of his integrity "in the view of respectable men."

And by 1820, Lanson was a leading figure in the black community and the owner of numerous properties and businesses, including a livery service.

In the 1820s, Lanson's fortunes reversed. He began to lose properties to foreclosure, and he acquired a reputation as a vice king.

Two factors may have worked against Lanson and help explain why he was treated the way he was, Hinks said.

For one, many of his properties were built on the fringe of the city in open land that is now the Wooster Square area. As long as Lanson and other free blacks were settling away from built-up New Haven, no one seemed to care, Hinks said.

But by the 1820s, the city was spilling into that neighborhood, and whites wanted the real estate for housing and businesses.

Trout said Lanson amounted to a threat to middle-class business-

men, some of them among those who coveted the Wooster Square land.

"Lanson is, I think, more or less forced off that property," Hinks said.

In the 1820s, after his swift rise, banks began to foreclose on Lanson's mortgages.

Secondly, immigrants, including Irish laborers, were mixing with the black families in the area, raising eyebrows among the city's middle class.

"A lot of attention is being paid to the fact that there is white and black mixing in these establishments of Lanson's in the late 1820s," Hinks said.

By the 1830s Lanson's reputation was ruined, and he was in constant trouble with the law.

"He is one of these incredible stories of the rise and fall of someone," Trout said. "I wish it had a better ending. He physically helped build New Haven."