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## **William Lanson: New Haven's African King**

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by Gary Highsmith

All education must lead to deep understanding and mastery. Introduction to many forms of knowing is absolutely necessary. The problem is that most of our understandings about life that are being taught to our children have ceased to be life giving and life sustaining and do not lend themselves to self-reliance. (1)

—Haki R. Madhubuti, *Too Much Schooling Too Little Education*

### ***INTRODUCTION***

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Without question, textbooks that are most commonly required by, and used in public schools throughout this country woefully underrepresent and/or misrepresent the accomplishments and contributions that Black people have made in the United States. In most cases, when Black people are mentioned, it is usually in the context of their enslavement in America, or in some facet of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 60's. While both historical references in the previous sentence are important studies, they certainly do not represent the sum total of the history of Black people in America.

What is at the heart of this tremendous dearth of information regarding Black people has been a very much ingrained and pervasive form of institutionalized racism that diminishes or marginalizes the accomplishment of Black people. For, as University of California, Berkeley history professor Leon Litwack notes:

No group of scholars was more deeply implicated in the miseducation of American youth and did more to shape the thinking of generations of Americans about race and blacks than historians . . . whether by neglect or distortion, the scholarly monographs and texts they authored perpetuated racial stereotypes and myths.(2)

This unit, intended for use in grades 6-12 (with required variations), can be used as one of many ways to effectively challenge the current perspective that seeks to make the history of European descendants the predominate focus in public education, at the expense of the important histories of Black people. Thive as its primary objective a fair and accurate portrayal of the varying roles played by all people.

Along those same lines, simply isolating one or two high-achieving Blacks does not accomplish much unless it leads to something much more comprehensive in breadth and scope. That is, history is the story of

people—not a person or persons—and must be viewed at all times in the larger context of world events. While heroism has its place, they are not the most important things to consider here. What is important to consider is the search for the proper roles that people have played in history, which—if done honestly—can and should lead to curriculum inclusion.

As such this unit, which discusses the life and times of William Lanson,—dubbed New Haven’s African King—is truly about more than Lanson. It is about curricular exclusion and inclusion, the development of New Haven as a thriving port town, the near maximizing of human potential, the inspiration that one often garners from knowing of the efforts and determination of one who attained in spite of all the odds stacked against him. It is about the human spirit, about self-reliance, about excellence.

This unit has several generic objectives for a curriculum infusion process. (More specific objectives can be found in the lesson plan section of this unit).

1. A Story. Storytelling is one of the most underutilized, but highly effective ways to teach and transmit history (irrespective of the grade level). Story work best in keeping the interest of students and provide an interesting departure from traditional historical lectures.
2. Master the Story. All teachers in every discipline should have a working knowledge of the history of Black people in New Haven. In other words, teachers should have a repertoire of content and principles of this history which allows them to maximize use of any curriculum materials they may develop. For teachers to effectively exercise professional judgment, the judgment itself must be rooted in a fundamental understanding of the history of Black New Haveners.
3. Support Base. Appropriate books, videotapes, maps, etc., must accompany this lesson, and be obtainable by classroom teachers. Conferences, resource people, field trips and special programs which high-light the achievements of Black New Haveners are also necessary.
4. Community Awareness and Participation. This unit must have the backing of members of the community of all ethnic groups who have extensive knowledge of the history of Black New Haveners. If this happens, there is the possibility of greater cultural exchange and storytelling.(3)

Finally, there is perhaps no Black New Havener who has been as overlooked and or marginalized as master engineer William Lanson. Lanson deserves recognition for many reasons, but is most commonly known as the person responsible for extending New Haven’s Long Wharf out to deep water. This made New Haven a thriving port town.

The story of William Lanson is truly one of determination, wisdom and community building at time when many Blacks—in both the North and South—were mired in either de facto or chattel slavery. His is a story that inspires and informs; that enlightens and encourages. And while Lanson would meet hard times, and eventually die in Almshouse, his spirit was never broken and he truly earned the title of New Haven’s African King.

## ***NARRATIVE***

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History, when written and interpreted properly, has a way of enlightening and fascinating that is quite unlike any other social science discipline. The study of history probes, questions, validates and corrects.

The contributions of William Lanson, a once influential and prosperous contractor and member of New Haven Connecticut's Black community, and who was best known as the individual responsible for extending New Haven's Long Wharf between 1810 and 1812, have never benefited from history's probing, questioning and corrective powers. The extension of the Long Wharf had a profound impact on New Haven's development as a successful port town after 1812, and yet the expansion of the Wharf was, in and of itself, an accomplishment which earned William Lanson a place in the history of American engineering and construction in general, and in New Haven history in particular. However, William Lanson's significance cannot be limited to the expansion of the Wharf because he was, as T.R. Trowbridge stated, "a respected man of energy and skill, and was a useful citizen . . . in his latter days, he fell into bad repute, but even then was a man receiving considerable respect for his previous worth. *He was capable of great things.*" (4)

Born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1776, this future master engineer was a descendant of the prestigious Lanson family that had been in Connecticut for four generations. A gap, however, exists between William Lanson's recorded childhood history and the period which he came into his own in the field of engineering, roughly 1807. In Lanson's "*Statement To The Public: The Trials and Tribulations of an Entrepreneur in the 1840's in New Haven*", he gives a brief history of his life, written in his own words, so that the public would know the truth concerning his endeavors. Lanson himself fails to mention his childhood and as a consequence we are required to begin by examining first, his most well known undertaking—the extension of New Haven's Long Wharf in 1810.

Because New Haven was founded by commercial men, there was an initial consideration by town leaders to construct several small wharves. However, that consideration gave way to the idea of a united effort to build one wharf. This one wharf was to be a community effort as: "every male inhabitant of town between the ages of 16 and 60 would be given four days work towards building the wharf." (5)

On November 23, 1663, the state government issued a grant to Sam Bach to build a wharf or dock at the lower end of Fleet street (present day lower State street). "This place eventually came into the possession of Mr. Jonathan Atwater, and may be considered as the first wharf built in the harbor . . . and this with the succeeding grant to Mr. Thomas Trowbridge (for the construction of a wharf at Fleet street may be regarded as the commencement of the Long Wharf)." (6)

There were a number of extensions to the "Union Wharf" as it was known until 1737. The first extension was built in 1731 when the Union Wharf Enterprise Company was established. This company's name would change from Union Wharf to Long Wharf in 1737.

The wharf further grew under private ownership, but later experienced severe financial difficulties. The result was a General Assembly Charter in 1760 primarily because the number of persons with private financial interests had become too excessive, but also because there was no concrete plan to complete the extension, many investors lost faith in the extension of the wharf, and some of the initial investors had died.

Despite the failure of the private undertaking, the harbor was considered so vital to the potential prosperity of New Haven that town residents chipped in funds to supplement the money appropriated by the General

Assembly in 1771 to extend the Wharf. The Long Wharf was once again extended in 1772.

The coming of the Revolutionary War further complicated the problem because as money became increasingly difficult to come by for people in America at that time, docking fees became even harder to collect. Many ships that arrived at the Long Wharf were either unwilling or unable to pay the docking fees required. In 1785, the General Assembly responded by prohibiting all vessels from docking in the Wharf until all their respective docking fees were paid in full. A short time later, the General Assembly drafted a proposal to offer the Wharf to the United States Government if it would maintain it. This initiative failed because the federal government was unwilling to accept financial responsibility for the facility.

For the next twenty five years, the issue of Wharf expansion increasingly caused frustration, disillusionment and impatience among New Haven residents, many of whom depended upon the Wharf for their personal and financial well-being.

By 1776 the Wharf had been extended, but it's length still created major difficulties for ships. Because New Haven's harbor was extremely shallow, larger ships carrying heavy cargo ran the risk of literally getting stuck in the harbor. As a consequence, ships were forced to anchor offshore where they were unloaded by lighter ships.

During the federal period, the Wharf was finally extended out to deep water. The engineer responsible for this difficult feat was William Lanson. Lanson began extending the Wharf in 1810 and "By 1812 the Wharf stretched 3480 feet into the harbor comprising the town's major commercial area and the longest Wharf in the U.S." (7) It is believed that William Lanson executed this difficult task to show that a Black man could do what a White man could not.

The ingenuity, relentless energy and drive of William Lanson to make New Haven's Wharf the longest in the United States was nothing short of spectacular. As he declared: "I used to bring my stone in scows that would carry about 25 tons at a load. The tide in this river [the Mill River] rises about six feet, and it is considered very dangerous going under the bridge. A scow must go up on the flood tide and come down on the ebb tide, and it was always considered to want three men to manage a scow, and get one load, in the day time. But I have performed the same thing myself, many a time, alone, at the night tide, taking a scow, and have been up that crooked river, . . . and got my load, the darkest night that had ever been; getting four extra loads in one week, and 30 in one season, which would make my extra money about \$50.00 a season, but how easy it all went for me." (8).

The issue concerning whether William Lanson labored under such life-threatening conditions for the money, prestige, or because he wanted to do what no White man could is arguable. However, there is an interesting story in T.R. Trowbridge's: *History of the Long Wharf* explaining why Lanson wanted to extend the Wharf. As Trowbridge wrote: "A gentlemen traveling last year in the state of Iowa . . . casually heard someone speaking of New Haven and its institutions. He mentioned Long Wharf, saying it is the longest Wharf in the world, that it exceeded five miles in length and was built by a Negro; . . . that this Negro . . . contracted to build it merely to show what a Black man was capable of doing and that he succeeded." (9).

Irrespective of what motivated William Lanson, the extension of the Wharf was a testament to his acumen in the fields of construction and engineering, as well as his sea-faring talents. Lanson proclaimed that ". . . there was one of the best scows sunk within about 150 feet from the Neck bridge [where State street crosses the Mill River] loaded with very large stones, of the weight of about one ton each. She would carry about 30 tons, and was underwater at the lowest tides about 18 inches. I contrived a plan, and got the scow home in three

days . . . “ (10). William Lanson got the scow home by raising it during the low tide.

Much of the supposed “bad repute” that William Lanson fell into in his latter years stemmed from the activities surrounding the Liberian Hotel, which he owned and “operated”. William Lanson sold New Guinea, which was land he owned in a community east of Wooster Square whose residents were of African descent. New Guinea was near the predominantly Irish section of town called Slineyville, which was named after its founder, John Sliney, who was one of the first Irish settlers who owned and operated a place of entertainment exclusively for the Irish population. William Lanson then bought the “old-slaughterhouse”, located at the end of Greene street and originally built by Ebenezer Peck to slaughter, barrel and export beef cattle. William Lanson renovated this slaughterhouse, and in its place, constructed affordable housing for people of African descent. The name of this dwelling was the Liberian Hotel. At the Liberian Hotel, writes Robert Warner, “immoral entertainment could be had . . . [There was an] Unauthorized raid in 1831 in which the mob, with insulting discrimination, “arrested” only Whites . . . The Negroes were allowed to run, the White mob not considering Negro morals to be their concern . . . New Liberia [the part of town in which the Liberian Hotel stood] remained a vice-center until the hotel burned down in 1842.” (11).

Unfortunately, Warner does a dismal job in conveying the realities of the Liberian Hotel. In its present context, Warner’s writings surmise or infer that William Lanson was a slum and vice lord in the Negro section of New Haven. However, Lanson painted a different picture when he wrote: I had a fall in the year of 1843 and hurt my breast . . . I moved into fleet street, [present day lower State street] and myself with my wife, and another man and his wife, was all family. There were two persons who came [to my house] and they had very bad colds, and wanted to stay at my house; . . . the next day I did take them for one week. I went out of town a few days, and when I returned there were two more very sick indeed . . . the more I did, the sicker they grew, and one that came last died the first month . . . The whole was about six months of sickness. I stopped about six months in this house on Fleet street and it cost me a good sum of money; but no pain was spared on my part to have those people that were sick attended to by their acquaintances. We should suppose, and it is my opinion, that the prejudice against the Liberian Hotel [approximately between the years 1836 and 1842], and this dreadful unhappy spell of sickness and two deaths at the house in about five months, raised some excitement in that neighborhood against my place; . . . And here I want to say that when I built the Liberian Hotel, I had no wish to impose upon the public, but that *I rented it to two or three different tenants and in their hands it go a bad name. I never kept it more than ten months, and during that time I was engaged in building Mr. Abraham Heaton’s Wharf.*” (12). (Emphasis added).

I imagine that it is more interesting, (despite the lack of professionalism) to write about the supposed flaws of historical characters, particularly those characters that are Black, than to attempt to explain the reality of these events. Warner’s portrayal of Lanson lacked any real support. In the first place, Warner alludes to an “Unofficial raid” of the Liberian Hotel where Whites were arrested but Blacks were allowed to go free. There are a few flaws in this observation: 1) The raid was “unofficial” and, in all probability, was designed by either rival businessmen or White male leaders in the town to discredit the character of William Lanson by whipping up public sentiment against the hotel primarily in the White community. Thus the arrest of only Whites could be used as evidence that William Lanson’s business interests were in some way directly responsible for immoral behavior on the part of Whites in New Haven; 2) Warner found discrimination in the fact that only Whites were arrested and judged this “insulting”, but failed even to mention the unlawful arrest and imprisonment of William Lanson in 1844 on “new adultery charges.”

As regards Warner’s baseless assertion that Lanson was the forerunner of the ghetto slum lord, it should be recognized that William Lanson filled a void by offering housing to Black people in New Haven at a time when

Whites simply refused to do so. Lanson transformed old barns and a slaughterhouse into livable, affordable apartment buildings for New Haven's Black community. Not only are Warner's inferences baseless, but also present an incomplete picture of events in that part of the city. However, Colonel Gardner Morse in his article entitled: "Business Enterprise and Movements in Real Estate between 1825 and 1837", presents a more accurate and complete picture of the Liberian Hotel and its surrounding houses when he stated that: "William Lanson was induced to dispose of his Real Estate on Franklin Street . . . and establish a settlement on the waterfront at the foot of Greene Street . . . known as the slaughterhouse which he converted into a house of resort and entertainment [The Liberian Hotel] for guest of his kind and *surrounded it with buildings and barracks for the accommodation of tenants of color of [an] . . . unfortunate condition of life . . .*" (13) (Emphasis added).

William Lanson was a skilled and able man who prospered in nearly all his undertakings. For nearly fifteen years, he owned a livery stable which had an average of twenty horses and carriages, coaches and wagons, and appeared to do quite well. He asserted " [I] also came in possession of twelve houses and one acre of ground in a good part of the city. At this time [I] had got together, in land, houses and Wharfing in this city, what was worth about \$10,000.00 . . ." (14).

Additionally, "the actual labor aonist, served as the first minister of the congregation.

In 1839, Connecticut's first railroad was built on the eastern edge of what was hoped to be the "New Township." The New Township encompassed the entire area between Olive Street and the Mill River (including Chapel, Academy, East, Franklin, Greene and Grand streets [as Grand Avenue was called at that time], respectively.) Not many people lived in the new township, as there were only several buildings scattered throughout. Franklin and Greene Streets were the only open thoroughfares there. Unfortunately, the promise of the "New Township" did not materialize, due primarily to the failure of the Farmington Canal. Despite the failure of the canal, the coming of the railroad changed the port town of New Haven from a mercantile center to a manufacturing center. As a result of the boom in manufacturing and the state's first railroad, a "sub-community appeared briefly . . . New Guinea, (mentioned earlier in this essay), operated by Black King William Lanson and a struggling group of buildings called Slineyville, inhabited by Irishmen who had come to town to dig the canal and later stayed on to build the railroad." (16).

Despite the prosperity that William Lanson enjoyed, he had rough times as well. When William Lanson fell, he did so with the velocity and force that so aptly characterized his ascent to the peak of the construction trade in New Haven.

Nearer the end of his prosperity, William Lanson assessed his property holdings to be worth about ten thousand dollars. "I do not think my indebtness" he added "was more than half the sum. This was about the time it was so fashionable to take the benefit of the bankrupt act, and I was urged against my feelings to do so . . . till I finally consented, against the principle by which I always meant to live by. I entered into this thing not considering as much as I have since, and lost the whole of my property, and it appears as if every effort I have made since that time is against me. At that time, I gave deed of all my property , for five cents, and as the person to who I deeded it thought it not proper to give the deed into my hand soon, we let it stand; but this friend died very suddenly, and there was no chance to get a quit claim deed from him, so that *I lost all my property that I had worked for all night and day* [in approximately 1847]." (17). (emphasis added).

In addition to forfeiting all of his property, William Lanson was bought to court on trumped up charges: "I was holden and did appear on about fifteen days after the last funeral at my house, in a bond \$500.00 on a new law relating to adultery. I suppose it must be made out by good eye witnesses on the part of the state, or I be



set at liberty, which I knew was proper and right, and I had sixteen witnesses that know the same . . . I also paid two fines the same season [roughly 1845] . . . and in about 15 days after the last person died, I went to jail and stayed for 6 months and 14 days, when I was innocent of the crime against me.” (18)

The assassination of William Lanson’s character did not cease in 1845 as he further testified that “I have been in prison five times since, which will make out in all about 450 days in six years and I . . . do not know what it is for . . . I should think that in 5 or 6 years they would find something, *but I never have known anything found in out of the way by anyone, therefore I think you have been at me so faithfully, must be mistaken in the person.* ” (19) (Emphasis added).

While in jail, William Lanson was stricken with arthritis and possibly pneumonia. Now in his mid-to-late sixties, the severe cold and dampness of the jail cell caused considerable damage to his joints and limbs. Yet, the wretched conditions of the jail cell were incapable of dampening the spirits of the Black King of New Haven as he proclaimed” I am going to deal in clothing on Franklin Street shortly, and if I keep my health I hope I may do well . . . while my health remains, I must do what I can.” (20).

On May 29th, 1851, this 75 year old “Black King of New Haven” who had attained the peak of both the engineering and construction trades in New Haven, died penniless in an Almshouse in New Haven, Connecticut. The cause of his death was gangrene.

It is only fitting that this essay end in the words of William Lanson himself as he states, “ I have been acquainted with five generations of Lanson blood, but I never knew any of that family to steal the value of four cents worth, and I do not think there is one person in this state that can contradict the same.” (21).

## Lesson Plan #1

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### **Resources:**

1. Copy of Evaluation
2. Copy of Essay

### **Objective:**

To make students aware of the life and times of William Lanson, and to encourage greater interest in history and historical figures.

Entry Point A: Teacher will begin by informing class that it is important to have various people represented in the curriculum. In addition to any other assignments that may serve this purpose, they will be spending about between 5-10 classes learning about an important figure in New Haven’s history—William Lanson. Teacher will then distribute a survey to ascertain students general knowledge of the contributions made by Black New Haveners. (See A-1 attached). Teacher should inform the students that this survey will not be graded and will be used only to measure students current content knowledge. Teacher then distributes evaluation. (Students are given approximately 20 minutes to complete evaluation).

Entry Point B: Teacher asks for volunteers to read their answers. If none volunteer, teacher should

call on students at random. After about 10 minutes, teacher should proceed to give overview of William Lanson based upon the essay in this unit. This should take about 5-7 minutes. Teacher then distributes the essay in this unit to students. (There may be a need to make some adjustments as to the length and wording, depending upon grade level). Teacher select students to read parts of the essay aloud. (This should be done for the rest of the period).

Entry Point C: Teacher should instruct students to finish reading the essay for homework, and be prepared to have an intelligent discussion of its contents for the next class. (For a sample of Guided questions please see A-2)

## A-1 STUDENT EVALUATION

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### **Directions:**

Please answer these questions to the best of your ability. You will not be graded on this, however, this form is important because it will help me in giving you information that you do not already have.

1. Name five Black people who have lived in New Haven between 1638 and 1900 that have had an important impact upon the city.
2. Briefly tell me something about these people that encouraged you to choose them.
3. What do you think that life was like for Black New Haveners in the 1800's?
4. Who was William Lanson, and what is he most famous for doing?
5. Why do you think the Long Wharf would be important for a town like New Haven?
6. In what ways do you think it was possible for Black people to be successful in New Haven in the 1800's?
7. What important contributions do you think that Black New Haveners have to the development of this town?
8. If you were alive in the 1800's, what important contributions do you think you would have made, and why?



## A-2 GUIDED STUDY QUESTIONS FOR DAY 2 OF LESSON

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1. For what accomplishment is William Lanson best known?
2. What kind of impact did this accomplishment have upon the development of New Haven?
3. Why wasn't Lanson's feat accomplished by someone else before he did it?
4. According to some people, why did Lanson accomplish such an important task?
5. What was the Liberian Hotel, and what is your opinion of it after reading the essay?
6. Why did William Lanson claim that there were so many problems with the Liberian Hotel?
7. Besides the feat for which he is best known, in what other types of business ventures did Lanson involve himself?
8. What very important institution did Lanson help to form for the Black community? What is the name of this institution today?
9. What are some of the most important things that you learned as a result of reading this essay?
10. Do you think that Lanson was wrongfully imprisoned? Why or why not?

## Lesson Plan for Day 2

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### **Resources:**

1. Copy of Essay
2. Copy of guided questions
3. Map of New Haven in 1800's

### **Objective:**

To make students aware of the accomplishments of Lanson, and to sharpen students debating skills by fostering discussion concerning his life and times.

Entry Point A: Teacher will remind students that last night's homework was to complete the essay on William Lanson and to be able to discuss its contents during this class. Teacher then has class continue to read aloud the essay on Lanson, so that he or she can clarify any matters which students are unclear of.

Entry Point B: Teacher then has the option of handing out questions and have students answer them individually at first and then discuss the answers aloud. Or the teacher can simply lead a discussion with the guided questions as a basis for this discussion.

Entry Point C: Teacher then asks class to imagine that they were alive during Lanson's day. They would then have create a problem in the town of New Haven that potentially impacts all of its citizens. Students would then be required to come up with a detailed solution to this problem, based upon the resources available to them at the time.

## Lesson Plan for Day 3

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### **Objective:**

To encourage the use of creative problem solving among students, and to have them gain an appreciation for the task performed by William Lanson, given the resources at his disposal.

Entry Point A: Students will read aloud their unique problem and detailed solution to this problem. At the conclusion of each student presentation, the class as a whole should critique both the problem and solution, posing their own solutions if they have them. Teacher should facilitate the discussion. This should take at least one class period, if not more to complete.

Entry Point B: Teacher informs the class that they will be going on a field trip to the Long Wharf to see, up close and personal, the significance of Lanson's accomplishment. The tour of the Wharf should be given by someone with knowledge of its history. The New Haven Colony Historical Society can help to locate such a guide.

Entry Point C: Teacher should inform the class that they will also be visited by members of New Haven's Black community who will come in to talk to them about the history of Black New Haveners. There are several such people willing to do this, most prominent among them is Edna Canegie, a retired New Haven Teacher and well-known griot concerning New Haven's Black community.

Entry Point D: Teacher also gives a research assignment to class. Students should research a Black New Havener who has made important contributions to the city. The Afro-American Historical Society is an excellent resource in this regard. They have extensive bibliographies, books and other sources of information on Black New Haveners. The research paper could be 3-5 pages (depending on the available information).

## Notes

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1. Mwalimu J. Shujaa, *Too Much Schooling, Too Little Education: A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies*. (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1994). p.5.
2. Asa Hilliard, et. al, *Infusion of African and African American Content in the School Curriculum*. (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), Introduction, xiii.
3. Adapted from *Ibid*. Pgs. xxii-xxiii.
4. Trowbridge, T.R. " *History of Long Wharf in New Haven*. " Read May 25, 1863 in New Haven. (New Haven: Thomas J. Stafford ) Volume I. p. 98.
5. *Ibid*. 88
6. *Ibid* . 87.
7. *Ibid* . 88.
8. Phillip Schiff, " *Long Wharf: A History*. " (Yale Term Paper) December 1977. pgs. 9-10.
9. William Lanson " *Public Statement* " 1840. Pge. 3.
10. T.R. Trowbridge, "*History of Long Wharf in New Haven*." p. 98.
11. William Lanson " *Public Statement* " 1840. p. 3.
12. Robert Warner " *Negroes in New Haven*. " (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press 1940 and 1968 by Robert Warner, Arno and N.Y. Times Press). p 28.
13. Lanson, " *Public Statement*." p. 4-5.
14. Col. Gardner Morse "Business Enterprise and Movements in Real Estate between 1825 and 1887. Read May 30th, 1887.
15. Lanson, *Public Statement*. p. 3.
16. *Ibid*. 2.
17. Elizabeth Mills Brown, " *New Haven: A Guide to Architecture and Urban Design*." (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976). p. 180.
18. Lanson , *Public Statement*. pg. 4.
19. *Ibid* . 6.
20. *Ibid*. 8.
21. *Ibid*. 8.

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