



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1997 Volume IV: Student Diversity and Its Contribution to Their Learning

William Lanson: New Haven's African King

Guide for Curriculum Unit 97.04.04
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Unfortunately, social studies and history textbooks commonly used in New Haven Public Schools either under represent or misrepresent the contributions that Black people have made in the development of New Haven as a viable port town. When mentioned, Black people are almost always discussed in the context of their enslavement.

While there is not one unit in and of itself that can correct the academic wrongs done in regards to Blacks in New Haven history, one must start somewhere. The life and times of William Lanson, a prosperous and important figure in the history of New Haven's Black community, is a perfect place to start.

William Lanson is best known as the individual responsible for extending New Haven's Long Wharf out to deep water in the early 1800's. Prior to Lanson's important accomplishment, most ships avoided New Haven's Wharf due to the extreme difficulty it posed in terms of docking. This directly impacted the financial livelihood of nearly every resident in New Haven. Because of Lanson - a master engineer - New Haven became one of the most viable port towns on the eastern seaboard.

While this accomplishment in and of itself should have provided Lanson with an important place in New Haven history, his accomplishments did not stop there. He was a wealthy businessman and property owner, as well as an active member of his community. He was also involved in the creation of New Haven's first Black church.

Finally, we have much to learn from the life and times of William Lanson. It is my hope that students will be inspired by his dramatic story.

(Recommended for Social Studies, Black History, American History and Ethnic Studies, grades 7-12)

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