

## African Americans in Industry

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### Overview

This topic can be integrated into unit on African Americans in the north and race relations in the 19th century in a grade 8 classroom.

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**Compelling Question: What factors lead to economic success in 19th century Connecticut?**

### Introduction

William Lanson, a runaway slave, influential and prosperous contractor, and member of New Haven, Connecticut's Black community, was best known as the individual responsible for

extending New Haven's Long Wharf between 1810 and 1812. He was also involved in the building of the Farmington Canal. He was very successful at first, yet he lost much of his wealth and reputation before he died in 1851. Personal and economic factors played a role in his rise as "King of the Colored Race" in New Haven; race and political factors were responsible for his personal loss at the end of his life.

## Supporting Questions

Eco 9-12.1 and Eco 9-12.5 refer to the [Connecticut Social Studies Frameworks](#) .

- How did canals help to build the economy of New Haven and Connecticut? (Eco 9-12.5)
- What was the role of the Farmington Canal in the economic development of Connecticut? (Eco 9-12.5)
- What economic and social issues confronted African Americans in 19th century New Haven? (Eco 9-12.1)

## Purpose

Students will explore the life of William Hanson and understand those economic, racial and political factors responsible for his accomplishments and losses in New Haven.

## Historical Context

The early 19th century witnessed America struggling to forge a post-revolutionary identity. Having come off success in its battle for independence, America experienced an explosive growth of cotton and slavery in the South which facilitated divisive debates about the rights of all men to be free. These debates affected Connecticut slaveholders and abolitionists alike, manifesting themselves in such stories as those of Prudence Crandall and John Brown. Meanwhile, Connecticut slowly established itself as one of America's most prominent manufacturing states, providing the country with iron, brass, rubber, textiles, clocks, gunpowder, and armaments. Facilitating the growth of these industries was a renewed focus on transportation infrastructure that brought about the construction of

new roads and ambitious projects such as the Farmington and Windsor Locks canals.

—From: [Expansion and Reform](#), CT History.org

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### Related Resources

[Isaiah Lanson's statement and inquiry: concerning the trial of William Lanson, 1845](#), Yale Law Library

["King Of The Colored Race" Of New Haven Revealed](#), Allan Appel, New Haven Independent, Feb 27, 2014

[New Haven City Plan and Advisory Report](#) , Feb 17, 2010

[The Successes and Struggles of New Haven Entrepreneur William Lanson](#), Peter Hinks

[William Lanson's book of satisfaction : addressed to the public](#), 1848, Yale Law Library,

[William Lanson, Businessman, Contractor and Activist](#), Katherine J Harris, African American Connecticut Explored, 2013

[William Lanson: New Haven's African King](#) by Gary Highsmith, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, 1997

[William Lanson's Notice to the Columbian Register](#) , March 14, 1829, Citizens All: African Americans in Connecticut 1700-1850

[William Lanson Site](#), CT Freedom Trail

[William Lanson: The Slave Who Helped Build New Haven](#), Steve

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**Connecticut**  
*still revolutionary*

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### How To

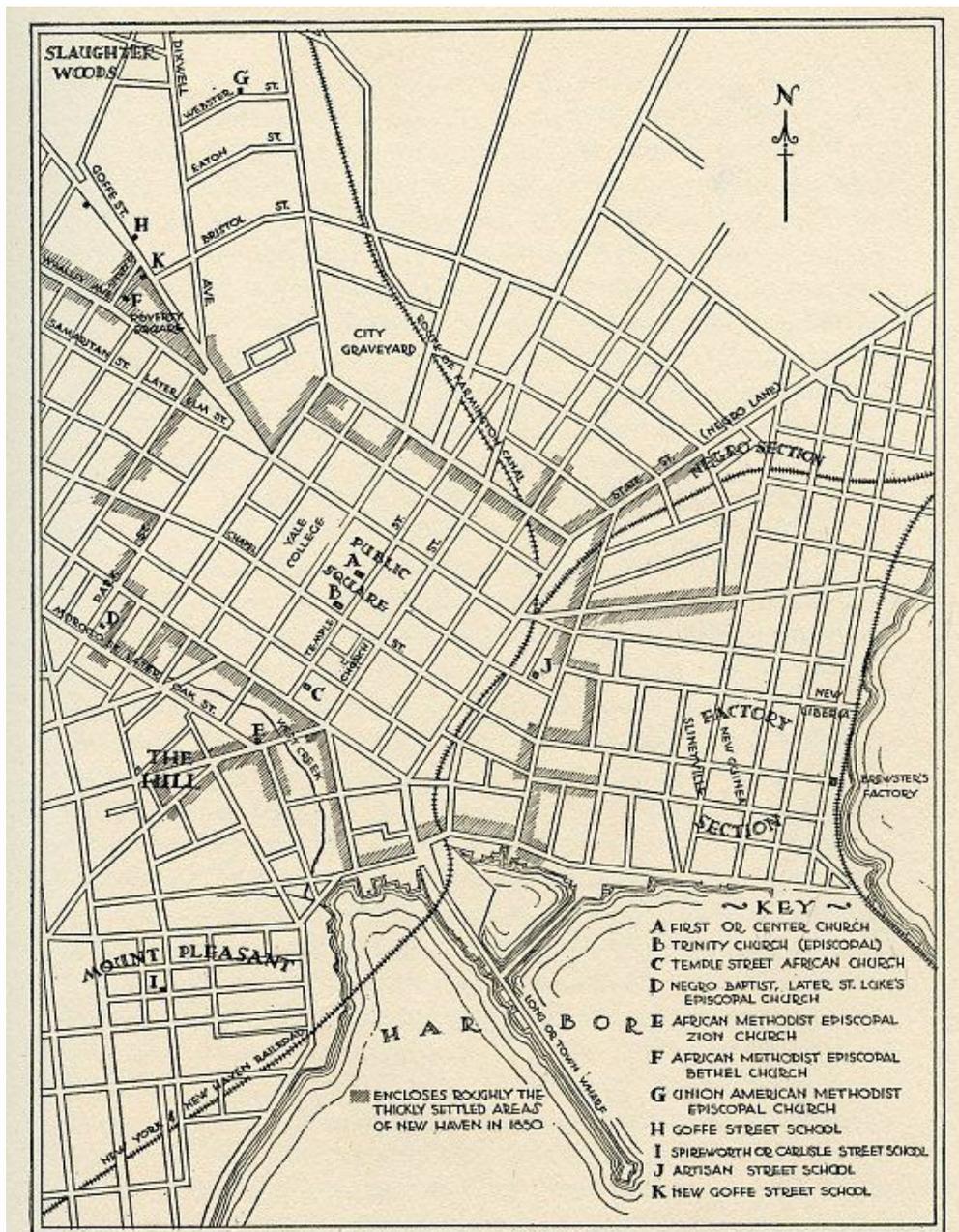
#### **Classroom Setup**

Teachers will have students work in groups of three to four. Student will need access to the internet and large poster paper. In addition, students will be taking notes and writing reflections in their journals.

#### **Procedure**

**Part 1:** QFT Exercise on "Map of Early Negro New Haven"

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REFERENCE MAP FOR EARLY NEGRO NEW HAVEN  
1810-1850

Have students view the map and develop questions about New Haven using the [QFT](#) technique:

Ask as many questions as possible in 2 minutes - No judgment!

- Categorize the questions as closed or open ended.
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each kind of question? Prioritize three questions from your list.
- Which questions will help you to understand cause and effect on this topic?

- Which questions will establish context?
- Which questions will give some insights to the different perspectives on this topic?
- Which of their questions could best lead to more investigation?

**Part 2:** Have students read the following essay about Lanson and answer questions about his life in New Haven.

Little is known about the early life of William Lanson, a remarkable black entrepreneur who contributed to New Haven's civic growth in the first half of the 19th century. Probably born free around 1785—perhaps in Derby—Lanson along with other family members moved to New Haven about 1803. Within the short space of seven years, he had become the city's principal wharf builder, an enterprise underwritten by his ownership of a large quarrying business.

#### *Lanson's Role in City's Civic and Economic Life*

In 1810, Lanson was the only contractor able to complete the complicated 1,350-foot extension to the town's Long Wharf. As Lanson later recalled, he had special scows (flat-bottomed transport boats) built capable of carrying 25 tons of stone at a time, stone which he and his laborers quarried from the Blue Mountain in nearby East Haven. The huge stones were loaded onto the scows on the river from a wharf carefully designed by Lanson to accommodate their great weight. Working relentlessly, even on "the darkest nights," Lanson finished this vital civic project.

Soon afterwards, Lanson established one of the leading hostelries in New Haven on Chapel Street. With credit widely extended by the merchants, Congregationalists, and Federalists who formed the city's old white elite, he also purchased substantial acreage and houses in New Haven's largely undeveloped New Township in the 1810s and '20s. Many blacks then settled in the area, where they mixed and mingled amicably with whites who lived there, visited or just passed through.

At a time many assume held few opportunities for African Americans, Lanson reaped a bounty. In an 1811 report on the history and current state of New Haven, Yale's Reverend Timothy Dwight praised the

wharfing work of William and his brothers for the "honourable proof of the character which they sustain, both for capacity, and integrity, in the view of respectable men." Through his enterprise, Lanson had "become a good member of society" and Dwight hoped Lanson's influence would uplift his racial brethren, many of whom had only recently come out of slavery.

By 1825, Lanson was contracted to build the retaining wall for the harbor basin into which the boats traversing the newly planned Farmington Canal would empty. In all his enterprises, he employed upwards of 30 men. At the same time, he helped found the African United Ecclesiastical Society and the African Improvement Society "for the improvement of the moral, intellectual, and religious condition of the African population of this city." Lanson was estimably embedded in the civic and economic life of New Haven.

#### *Expansion and Immigration Bring Rising Racial Antagonism*

The pace of change accelerated in New Haven in the 1820s. After 1825, the city began to develop the New Township lands (centered around modern-day Wooster Square), and this placed unprecedented pressures upon the black neighborhood there. Residences for the affluent were erected along with a host of manufacturing shops of diverse sizes—the largest was the swelling carriage-works of James Brewster—whose exclusively white employees required housing near their workplace. Construction of the Farmington Canal led to a dramatic influx of poor and Catholic Irish laborers into the town. Hundreds of other laborers and mariners followed as well.

By the 1820s, more whites condemned blacks for lacking industry, temperance, and moral continence and for causing the new social problems accompanying the city's growth. The flourishing of the local American Colonization Society, which called for the removal of the nation's free blacks to Africa, helped nurture these new racial antipathies among whites. Also, the old elite who had upheld and contracted with Lanson had lost their pre-eminence and acquired some new suspicions of their own about black character. In 1827, for example, a vocal white resident could boldly proclaim in a local newspaper: "Is not the residence of coloured people considered a calamity by our white people, universally?" Anyone offering employment or assistance to them was pronounced "guilty of injustice

towards white men, who have an exclusive right to be employed."

### *Changed Circumstances Dim Lanson's Prospects*

Despite Lanson's ongoing economic success, popular sources aggressively recast him as a purveyor of vice and disorder to black and white alike in the New Township and called for the neighborhood's extirpation. Yet, as in 1815 when he petitioned the General Assembly to protest the state's 1814 disfranchisement of African Americans, Lanson eloquently vocalized his opposition to these characterizations and their troubling implications. He had two lengthy articles printed in the local *Columbian Register*, lauding the residents of his neighborhood as largely "smart and industrious people of color." He unabashedly proclaimed the essential goodness of African Americans and the great capacity of white and black to interact successfully at work, at governance, and at play.

But rising white prejudices won the day. By 1830, Lanson had moved from the Wooster Square area and in July opened a new grand "Boarding-House for the people of color" in a then-isolated corner of northeastern New Township. He called the facility the Liberian Hotel, relocated his hostelry there and planned to have sailboats for oystering as well. He also expected to continue his wharf building from the site. But Lanson's economic and social trajectory bent downward after 1830. Encountering economic and family reversals, mounting debts, problems with his health and that of his wife, and hounded by municipal authorities intent on discovering his connection to illegal activities, Lanson lost his properties and tumbled into poverty. Upon his passing in May 1851, one obituary recalled him as "a very enterprising negro...endowed by nature with more than a common mind." Yet, while economic, political, and demographic expansion brought numerous benefits to white New Haven after 1820, Lanson's fate reveals just how problematic that expansion proved to be for the city's blacks. Indeed, the city's growth often constricted their emerging but fragile freedom more than it enhanced it.

—Peter P. Hinks, [The Successes and Struggles of New Haven Entrepreneur William Lanson](#), CT History

What are Lanson's accomplishments?

- How did Lanson contribute to the development of New Haven? Development of Connecticut?
- What factors are responsible for the problems later in his life?
- What questions do you have about William Lanson?

**Part 3:** Have students read the PDF in four groups (there are four paragraphs.)

[William Lanson's Notice to the Columbian Register](#) , March 14, 1829

After students read each, they can share with the class and answer these questions as a class:

- How does Lanson help others in the community?
- How does Lanson defend himself from criticism of the white community?
- What role does race and class play in 19th century New England as evidenced in New Haven?
- What questions do you still have after reading this statement?



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### What's Next

#### Informed action

Have students read the following articles about memorials to William Lanson:

- [William Lanson Site on the Ct Freedom Trail](#)
- [New Haven City Plan Advisory Report](#)
- ["King of Colored Race of New Haven Revealed"](#)

While there are a few memorials to Lanson, most school children know nothing about him. Create a slideshow, PowerPoint, or Google presentation, for classroom use that illustrates the contributions of Lanson to Connecticut, especially to the city of New Haven. Indicate the grade level you are targeting. Include a [Six Word Memoir](#) to Lanson that highlights Lanson as an entrepreneur and civic activist.