

WILLIAM LANSON (1782–1851)

William Lanson was an African American activist, engineer, and entrepreneur from New Haven. As a businessman, he helped build two important New Haven landmarks: Long Wharf and the Farmington Canal. Both were designed to improve transportation and trade. Lanson hired many African American workers to complete this work, giving them opportunities they might not have otherwise had.

William Lanson was also an activist. He fought against slavery and supported the abolitionist movement. He thought every man who paid taxes should have the right to vote, whatever the color of his skin. He supported the idea of building a college for African Americans in New Haven.

In 1825, Lanson was elected “Black Governor” (also known as “African King”) of New Haven. Although he was a wealthy, influential man in his time, in the end, he was targeted by those threatened by his success and died with nothing. To this day, many are unfamiliar with him, his contributions, and his importance to our local history and the development of the City of New Haven.