

CitizensALL

African Americans in Connecticut 1700-1850

William Lanson's "Notice" to *Columbian Register*

Columbian Register (New Haven, CT)

March 14, 1829

In 1811, the Reverend Timothy Dwight, President of Yale College, had praised the work of William Lanson and his brothers as "honourable proof of the character which they sustain, both for capacity, and integrity, in the view of respectable men." By the end of the 1820s such praise had all but vanished. Connecticut's old guard had been overturned, and Lanson found himself beset financially and attacked and ridiculed in the newly emergent mass press. The Democratic *Columbian Register*, especially, routinely lampooned Lanson and the local black community, yet Lanson would often engage the *Register* in a vigorous defense of his character and actions.

In this document Lanson outlines his efforts in providing both employment and moral guidance to the less fortunate members of his community, a role entirely in keeping with the paternalism practiced by Dwight and expected of others, but entirely out of keeping with the virulent racism of the 1820s and '30s.

William Lanson's "Notice" to the *Columbian Register* (March 14, 1829)

I would request the citizens of this town to turn their attention towards the East for a few moments. I have thought proper to state a few facts in order to rebut some of the hard stories that are floating about this city by some individuals who mean to do every body good, concerning the dreadful conduct so said to be in Long street, New Township. What is the matter, I do not know; but I heard a dreadful noise there last night: I thought likely they were killing one another. Well, I have understood they carry on very bad,--I believe there is a grog-shop kept there; Oh bad! bad! I will tell you what the matter is--I have several small houses in this street, which contain about twelve small families, and there are a number of other buildings in the same street, which I think, together with mine, are generally filled up with second and third classes of people of color. I am not taking this people by house row, for I consider that there are some families in that street as smart and industrious people of color as any in town. Why I style those people above mentioned to belong to the lower classes, is on account of their slothful manner of living, and the awful disadvantages of being brought up in ignorance. These are mostly transient people--bred in ignorance, until they came or ran away from their bondage. Now, can we expect to gather wool from a hog's back? Here there may be a great number of them together, and how do they live?--by working along shore, sawing wood, going to sea, &c. Almost all kinds of people want some kind of recreation, and these people get all their shipmates together, and then they fiddle and dance, and there they will sing their hosting-sailor songs, so that it may be heard one mile. I sometimes stop them, and they will ask to be pardoned for making a noise; but I find that to be their mode of pleasure, and therefore I excuse them as much as possible.

There has been a License granted for selling ardent spirits, which has been kept for sale, with all kinds of provisions, and wood by the small measure, for the benefit of these people, &c. When I have work on hand, I generally keep 20 or 30 in constant employ, which I consider is worth [sic] a good deal to this town. You will find by the selectmen of this city that there has not been half so many assisted by this town from the New Township, as there were two years ago. In regard to my poisoning one of them, or being any kind of damage to them by selling spirits, as has been observed by some, I do think it is a mistake. I do say, and think I can prove, that there has not been a man of color who has frequented my store in 3 months, that makes a practice of getting drunk; for they buy their spirits in small quantities, and they do not drink as much liquor as they did when they used to buy 2 quarts of new rum for 20 cents. For the last 9 months there has been no quarrelling among our kind of people which had to be settled by law, and before that, for years, there was hardly a week passed by but some colored person was brought before some bar of justice.

When any thing is stolen, it must be the darkeys have done the mischief--so that they are obliged to shoulder all the sins which are done by white thieves--some whites have been seen carrying rails in the night from fences in the New Township.

As I stated before, the biggest part of these people ran away from bondage, with one common suit of clothes and no more; they must work some--therefore they are unfit to go to meeting; but I have spoken to Parson Jocelyn to hold meetings here every Sunday afternoon, and agreed to furnish one small room for that purpose. Here is another great obstacle in the way,--there are white women 3 doors below my store in my buildings, and white folks about the same distance above in Mr. Forbes' house. The people in my house consist of one old mother about 70 years old, and one sick daughter, and one infant child, and one well daughter. They agreed not to take in any women with them, which they have not, and I went and reported these women to Wm. Mix, Esq. immediately, as they were white women--and he told me if they behaved bad to turn them out, and he would take care of them. But here is another dreadful thing,--a very faithful man looking close to every body's business but his own must have been before my door one evening last month, with his mouth wide open, and did catch all the news that was going, and more too. Away he runs up town, to despatch the news. He says I was down to what's his name's place last night; what a dreadful place he is keeping there! I do not think it sufferable--for the darkeys were fiddling and dancing down in the cellar kitchen, and I saw some white men and women up stairs. They were not so noisy--but black people and white all under one roof, I think, is almost equal to Sodom, and I mean to have it broken up. It is no wonder this innocent man was so alarmed to see colored people in the cellar and white people up chamber. Now I will tell you all about this.--Some of the colored people's white shipmates, came to my place one evening last month and wanted supper for two or three couples, and wished to have it ready by 9 o'clock, which order was obeyed, and these men went up to Mr. Bishop's house, three-quarters of a mile north, in the same street. Said house is occupied by John Barthric. There's where those Ladies of Pleasure resided for several months. These men brought two or three of these ladies with them, and they took their supper, and paid me all I charged them, and they and these ladies dispersed from any of my apartments. This is the greatest part of the alarm about the white ladies--be sure, I feel above waiting on such company; but as I have met with so many losses, I feel somewhat reduced, and as I am keeping a catch-penny shop, I thought I would take up with such company as comes.

I have stated these facts to show that stories are not apt to lose by carrying, and that this class of colored people's walks or behaviour cannot be expected to be equal to the best bred gentlemen in this city. I would say one word further--that is, whenever this class of people get into any quarrel that comes to my knowledge, I can stop it very quick, and I tell them once or twice a month, if they are found to steal the value of one shilling, I would have them reported, and more than this, I offer a small bounty to those that I call the honest ones, to catch the others; and I feel as if I might be some advantage to the seafaring merchants, when their sailors get on their sprees. I have often advised them to go on board and attend to their business, which I have known to have a very good effect, and if they were to attempt to hide, or run away from their employers, after having shipped and taken their advance money. I would do all I could in favor of their employers. I would wish to keep my little catch-penny [sic] business agoing, and do as little injury to this town as possible. I shall not boast of any public business that I have done, or the taxes I have paid within the last twenty years, which have been several hundred dollars; but my losses for the last seventeen years have been very heavy indeed. My business has been within those years transporting goods and keeping livery stable, and I have lost in property and bad debts up to 1827, about \$6000. Then I became sub-contractor in building the pier by the side of the basin, for the Farmington Canal: I suffered a loss of about \$2000. In 1828, I took a contract from the Company, to the amount of about \$6000; I completed about one-third of the job, which was the worst part.--I then had to break off, and if I was to be settled with on that part, according to the contract, with the disappointment in my calculation and all, I shall suffer several hundred dollars; but I expect to finish the whole contract, whenever the company is ready, which is on a very close calculation indeed. But I am willing to finish, if possible, for I never made a contract or a bargain but what I was willing to fulfil--nor ever contracted a debt but what I meant to pay. As Providence has smiled on me, I have, with making great exertions, paid up every laboring man that has ever done any work for me on or about the Farmington Canal, who has been employed by me, &c. But there is one loss more, which I never have published before, and which I consider to be more than a double loss to all I have mentioned--that is, my wife has been subject to intemperance for the last ten years, so that she has been incapable of doing any kind of business about 4 days a week, and the other 3 days she is well, and can do anything that is to be done about the house as well as she could even in her best days. I consider this the hand of Providence--therefore I treat her with kindness, and when she is not able to get her own victuals, I have it got for her--and I am bound to say that she has the comforts of life, and is as comfortably situated as any woman in this town; and I thank God that I have been privileged so to do thus far. WM. LANSON

New-Haven, March 4, 1829. [Paid]