

## MODULE III:

### The Emergence of Free Black Communities in Connecticut, 1800-1830

**Introduction:** Between 1800 and 1830, the free black population of the state would grow steadily. Many of these individuals moved to Connecticut's growing towns including New Haven, Hartford, and Middletown where more work could be found. In those locations, the free black population began to cluster in fledgling communities. New Haven witnessed the growth of a remarkable black community under the leadership of William Lanson, a prosperous landholder, stone mason, and stable owner. Prospects for the state's free black Americans however began to dim in the 1810s when an anxious General Assembly disfranchised them. A growing voice of citizens began to call for the removal of free black residents in the 1820s and condemned them as a degraded people.

#### 1. First Communities

- Numbers of free black individuals in Connecticut grew in the first decades after 1800. Many migrated towards the larger towns and cities of the state where they began to gather with others in early neighborhoods.
- As these fledgling communities became more settled, free Afrodescendant people began to create institutions such as churches and improvement societies to serve the needs of their communities. Prominent individuals from among them also began to assume positions of leadership.

The free black population of the North grew dramatically between 1790 and 1830. In 1790, free black individuals in the North numbered about 27,000; in 1810, 75,000; and in 1830, 145,000. The numbers of free black persons had grown since the Revolution even more dramatically in the South, especially in the upper South states of Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, and North Carolina. However, their importance continued to be outweighed by a much larger and even more rapidly expanding body of slaves. In the

North, freedom was becoming the rule for African Americans as slavery steadily declined. This new free African American presence was pronounced in the growing cities of the early nineteenth century North, especially the three eastern seaboard cities of Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia. In 1790, over 5000 free black Americans lived in these three cities alone; in 1810, 18,000; and in 1830, 26,000. Many thousands more, especially after 1810, settled in older smaller cities like Providence (Rhode Island), New Haven (Connecticut), Brooklyn and Albany (New York) and in newly emerging cities such as Buffalo (New York), Cincinnati (Ohio) and Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania). Free black populations were drawn to cities because of the greater economic opportunities available in comparison to more rural locales where work was limited and black people were largely barred by local practices from purchasing property. Cities also provided another enticement welcomed by free black Americans—the occasion to gather together in large numbers to form their own distinctive neighborhoods and communities. In the early nineteenth century, free people of color launched such neighborhoods in Philadelphia's Cedar Ward, on the north slope of Boston's Beacon Hill, and in the Fifth and Sixth Wards of Lower Manhattan.

As the free black population grew in Connecticut, black residents similarly tended to move towards the larger towns and cities of the state. While the state had a little more than 2500 free blacks in 1790, by 1810, it had 6500, and by 1830, more than 8000. During slavery, the enslaved had been spread throughout Connecticut to help meet the predominant agricultural needs of the colony. For example, the following small agricultural towns had also the following numbers of slaves in 1775: Milford, 158; Farmington, 106; Ridgefield, 36; Pomfret, 65; and Wallingford, 135. Yet, by 1800 and

after, these black populations had diminished significantly: Pomfret reported in 1800 that it had “very few, if any Negroes”; in the same year, Ridgefield had only 8; in about 1810, Farmington indicated it had no more than 30 blacks; in 1812, Wallingford reported 22; and in 1816, Milford stated that its black population was “small.” Moreover a number of these resident black people were still slaves and unable to move freely.

On the other hand, the black population in the growing urban centers of Connecticut was swelling. While New Haven, for example, had a large enslaved population—262—in 1775, its free black population in 1810 was 390 and by 1820 would surpass 625. The free black population in the cities was usually undercounted as well because a surprising number of fugitives from slavery in the South fled to these towns to avoid official detection. In New Haven in 1820, one townspeople observed that enslaved fugitives from the South “come northward and are rapidly increasing in this town” Another estimated in 1823 that New Haven contained no less than “about seven hundred free black people.” In New Haven and in other large towns such as Hartford, New London, and Middletown, free black workers could find employment as sawyers, bootblacks, domestics, launderers, day laborers, barbers, mariners, and as other service providers. Some, like William Lanson of New Haven, became property owners and businessmen. Homer Peters of Danbury opened a barber shop at the town’s Meeker Hotel. Work, although menial and poorly paid, was still readily available in the large towns allowing the black Americans a chance to maintain their independence.

Largely impoverished and treated with mounting disdain by the masses of whites, urban free black Americans sought increasingly to gather together, living, worshipping and socializing in spaces free from white control. In the decades after the Revolution,

many settled on the outskirts of towns like New Haven in makeshift dwellings, etching out a life as best they could. Due to costs and community customs, property and home ownership was beyond the reach of the vast majority of free black Connecticut residents.. Those renting places to live in large towns like New Haven often found a selection of dwellings which included squalid cellars or huts in the rear of backyards.

In New Haven, however, by the 1810s, William Lanson began purchasing inexpensive lots in a relatively undeveloped section of New Haven called *the New Township*. By 1820, he owned a remarkable amount of land there and had constructed a number of buildings with small residences for rent, many of which he rented to African Americans. By 1820, there were well over 150 black residents clustered in Lanson's district of the New Township, thus creating the first discernible black neighborhood in town. Their numbers grew throughout the expansive 1820s to include Lanson and the black author and future Episcopal minister, Jacob Oson.

This neighborhood heralded the rise of a broader and more evident black community. Lanson, an influential businessman, increasingly spoke for the black community and maintained working relationships with the area's leading white businessmen. In 1825, Lanson joined with other prominent black citizens (for example - Bias Stanley and Scipio Augustus) to form the African United Ecclesiastical Society – New Haven's first black Congregational church. In 1826, they launched the African Improvement Society and an associate Temperance Society. The same year, black city residents in Hartford formed the African Religious Society which became a Congregational Church by the early 1830s. The growing black community in Middletown followed suit in 1828 with the formation of an African Methodist Episcopal

church under the direction of The Reverend Jehiel Beman, an able community leader. By the 1820s, black communities in the larger Connecticut towns were coalescing. The construction of their own institutions testified to their mounting confidence and vigor.

## **2. Black Enterprise**

- Largely lacking education and financial resources, Connecticut's free black Americans made great efforts to compete effectively with whites economically and to establish themselves as reliable free laborers.
- A few African Americans in the state like William Lanson gained remarkable economic success by owning land and businesses. They came to embody the ideal of black enterprise.

In the early nineteenth century, numbers of leading American citizens agreed with the great Scottish economist, Adam Smith, that freedom spurred individual industry and enterprise. Slavery tapped the resources of the slaveholder by requiring him to support the enslaved even when they were not engaged in productive labor. The involuntary dependence this system fostered in the enslaved was demoralizing, rendering them powerless to labor for themselves. When the individual was unencumbered by slavery or by oppressive laws favoring the interests of a small class of the propertied, wealthy, and powerful, then enterprise would be unleashed. This enterprise embodied the individual's natural tendency to labor, behaving in ways that advanced his own best interests as well as those of the society in which he was rooted. Freedom and enterprise were the great engines for the economic and social development of this young American nation.

As slavery was withering in the North, a number of whites fretted that the formerly enslaved might not be able to meet standards of enterprise and industry. Their argument followed a stream of logic which mistakenly said, 'Reared in a dependent situation that fostered thievery and idleness, the former slaves might be unable to use

their newfound liberty with moral and intelligent judgment. The Reverend Timothy Dwight IV, 8th President of Yale College, wrote in 1810: “Liberty is a blessing in the hands of those who know how to use it, and are disposed to use it to good purposes.”

Individual enterprise in a free American society was grounded in owning land and property—in quantities large enough to demonstrate one’s self sufficiency and commitment as a useful member of the community and of the broader society. Due to a number of circumstances, relatively few black New Englanders were able to realize this goal. As a result, many town fathers in early nineteenth century Connecticut were doubtful about successful prospects for the future of their local residents of color. A Farmington inhabitant noted that “they have but little industry or economy & consequently no success in acquiring property.” Another in Lebanon added that “they are generally more inclined to dissipation than industry, consequently not much to the acquisition of property.”

But others characterized their social and business dealings with free black individuals in a more positive light. In New London, one official identified local free black inhabitants as industrious, religious, and family-oriented. Yet he still noted that they “fall short” in acquiring property. In New Haven, Timothy Dwight concluded that many of the local free black people were “uneducated to principles of morality, or to habits of industry and economy.” Yet he also discerned a significant beam of hope among them: “Almost all, who acquire an attachment to property, appear to assume better principles; or, at least, better practices. Several of the men have in this manner become good members of society.” Of several mentioned, the single most important person of color was William Lanson.

By 1810, Lanson, a former slave, had extended New Haven's Long Wharf by 1350 feet, an engineering challenge no local white contractor had been able to undertake successfully. The extension of the wharf was essential to the town's commercial prosperity. As well, by 1807, William and his brothers had begun to acquire parcels of land in New Haven's New Township. With the completion of the wharf, William and the Lanson brothers had become so well established, that Dwight proclaimed this accomplishment "an honourable proof of the character which they sustain, both for capacity and integrity, in the view of respectable men."

Lanson did not then rest on his laurels. He continued to use his freedom to advance economically and to contribute to the broader community. Into the 1820s, he purchased more and more land in the New Township. By the mid-1810s he was constructing buildings which would house many of the town's growing number of free black arrivals. He continued his quarrying business which had provided the huge stone blocks for the extension of Long Wharf. When New Haven launched the excavation of the Farmington Canal in 1825, its directors contracted with Lanson to build a large retaining wall in the harbor. By the late 1810s, Lanson had opened a stable in the center of New Haven which cared for the horses and carriages of numerous local citizens. He also had horses and wagons to rent and managed a successful carting business as well. Moreover, Lanson employed a number of local free black workers in his various business ventures. In 1829, he stated that "I generally keep 20 or 30 [black folk] in employ, which I consider is worth a good deal to this town". With these people on Lanson's payroll, New Haven need not be concerned with providing them with town assistance. Not only did his businesses contribute to the welfare of the city; Lanson usefully employed some

of New Haven's poorer people. At night, they may well have returned to one of his buildings for housing.

In the eyes of powerful local town leaders, William Lanson had proven himself a man of enterprise. An exceptional individual in his own right, to some he seemed to be the model of desirable moral character for free black Americans as they grew in their exercise of freedom. Local African Americans showed a respect for Lanson which he reciprocated. Lanson did not view them as a degraded people, but rather understood them as an intelligent, industrious, and resourceful people who continued to be confronted with "the awful disadvantages" in which they were raised. In a true Christian spirit, Lanson provided hope, sympathy, employment and housing for his brethren.

### **3. Citizenship**

- In the early nineteenth century, black men who owned enough property participated fully in local and state governance. At the turn of the century, free black persons appear moving towards a fuller freedom and a more clearly defined citizenship.
- Yet as the 1810s unfold, more and more whites question black Americans' fitness for citizenship and their capacity for responsible use of their freedom. The disfranchisement of black people in 1814 and 1818 signals the growing unwillingness of whites to include black populations as equal citizens.

In the early nineteenth century, citizenship was secured through the state in which one lived. States rather than the federal government made laws about voting, taxing, office holding and other issues which directly affected how citizenship could be exercised. The right of suffrage - one of the most important components of citizenship - was restricted to adult males and to those who owned a designated amount of property called a *freehold*. Adult males who owned the required amount of property were assured of the right to vote. Property was understood then as establishing one's integrity,

character and commitment to the preservation of the state. Without property, one's character and investment in the state was more suspect. Such people, it was argued, would be more vulnerable to the appeals of demagogues and tyrants and thus more likely to subvert the republic. Those with property and a certain level of wealth were deemed the society's "best men" and the most worthy of leading the nation in a responsible manner for everyone, voters or not. Early in the century, any black man with the required amount of property could vote in Connecticut and participate in local and state governance. No restrictions existed on the exercise of the franchise or their citizenship. In 1811, William Lanson along with a number of other black men in the state were freeholders and citizens.

In the years after the Revolution, some whites welcomed the prospect of an expanding black freedom and the eventual inclusion of African Americans into the nation as citizens. The members of the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Freedom, along with similar state societies, proclaimed in 1794 that we "must prepare them [ie. African Americans] for becoming good citizens of the United States, a privilege and elevation to which we look forward with pleasure, and which we believe can be best merited by habits of industry and virtue." The members of this elite society which included Timothy Dwight, the jurist David Daggett, Congressman William Hillhouse, and the prominent attorney and Congressman Simeon Baldwin were some of the wealthiest and most influential men in the state. Even though the Connecticut Society had disappeared by 1800, these men carried their convictions into the new century. In 1804, now Senator William Hillhouse was among a handful of Senators who fought ardently to bar slavery from the recently acquired Louisiana Territory. Hillhouse alone,

however, did so by affirming the essential humanity and equality of blacks and whites. Just as Timothy Dwight did for William Lanson in 1811, the voices of these influential men helped interpret for the white populace of the state the vision of a more extensive freedom. This gesture was well-timed in light of the relative weakness the black political voice at the time. Dwight, in particular, argued that the gross exploitation of black people during slavery had now imposed an unavoidable Christian obligation upon society to reach out to the formerly enslaved as fellow humans and help them overcome the damage and disadvantages brought about by that institution.

Nevertheless, by the 1810s, there was growing concern that free black Americans would not be able to shoulder the responsibility of full citizenship, regardless of whether they were property holders or not. Despite the glowing example of Lanson, the growing number of free black individuals in the state were viewed with trepidation. Poor, often uneducated, and racially stigmatized, the majority of black Americans remained at the bottom of society, accused by an increasingly unfriendly white populace of failing to take advantage of opportunities for advancement. Thirty years after emancipation had been launched in the state, condemnation and repression seemed to be replacing the fairness by an increasingly unfriendly white populace and good will formally extended to people of color emerging from enslavement. By the late 1810s, even former friends of black Americans in the Connecticut Society like Simeon Baldwin and David Daggett had largely abandoned the cause of equality. Baldwin and Daggett followed the wave of outspoken citizens who joined the American Colonization Society which promoted the return of free black people to Africa. Timothy Dwight's death in 1817 seemed to herald the mounting desertion of the call of liberty and equality for all.

By 1814, lawmakers moved for the first time to restrict the freedom of black Americans when the Connecticut General Assembly issued a statute of disfranchisement. This act was followed four years later by an even more decisive blow: the full disfranchisement of black persons under the new state Constitution of 1818. This same legislation expanded the franchise to include all adult white males, propertied or not. Now distinctions among citizens based on race and implied political inferiority were enshrined by the state's most revered and fundamental civic document—its Constitution.

William Lanson and Bias Stanley of New Haven would take the first organized action against this disfranchisement in 1815. In the petition they submitted to the General Assembly, they asserted that “they sustain a fair character for sobriety & integrity & are ‘persons of a quiet & peaceable behaviour & civil conversation; that by their industry & frugality they have been enabled to amass a small portion of property sufficient to purchase for each of them a comfortable home & to qualify them for freemen” and thus the right to vote.’ Yet the unjust law of 1814 “singled out” black men and denied them “the highest privileges of a free citizen.” Recognizing their political weakness and that “the feelings and prejudices of this community are so strong respecting the descendants of Africans,” they chose not to ask for a repeal of the law but simply for an exemption from taxation as they were denied representation in the Assembly. To the surprise of none, this request was denied. Nevertheless, this petition for ‘no taxation without representation’ revealed an emerging black political voice.

Yet their voice and persuasiveness could not match that of the larger opposition. Disfranchisement of blacks endured in the state throughout the antebellum era despite valiant movements against it led by black men and their white allies in the era's latter

decades. Although black Americans seemed moving towards fuller citizenship in the first decades after the Revolution, a white citizenry increasingly hostile to an expanding black freedom boldly blocked their aspirations in the 1810s.

#### 4. Reaction

- While the free black population grew in the state in the early decades of the nineteenth century and black communities were coalescing in various towns, the white population grew at a far more rapid pace. A ready supply of white laborers restricted black employment opportunities in the state's expanding manufacturing economy.
- White attacks on black freedom and character become more common and more vicious in the 1820s. The American Colonization Society called for the removal of free black people from the nation. More whites identify America as a nation 'for whites only'.

On one hand, the 1820s was a decade of positive growth for free black Americans in the North. Free black communities were coalescing in eastern seaboard cities and new, vital institutions like the African Methodist Episcopal church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church, the African Baptists, and the Prince Hall Masons were strengthening these communities, helping to connect them. The nation's first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, appeared in 1827 and celebrated these new communities and their progress. Early black political associations like Boston's Massachusetts General Colored Association were organized. They vehemently opposed the removal of African Americans to Africa. Moreover, powerful black voices like that of David Walker in his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* now spoke out publicly, excoriating slavery, the colonization movement, and racial injustice. Walker decried black servility and demanded that blacks immediately take action to end slavery and racial inequality in America. He would help spawn the abolitionist movement in the North.

On the other hand, the 1820s inaugurated an era of even more venomous attacks on the freedom and character of African Americans in the North. An explosion of northern European immigration offset any great need for black labor. White artisans effectively barred almost all blacks from working in skilled trades. The strength of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in the 1820s and the eminence of its leaders made the proposed removal of free black persons respectable and seemingly feasible. Attacks on the character of black people became even more vicious as more white Americans asserted that this nation offered no place of belonging or identity for people of color who wished to be something other than slaves. At the same time as free black individuals were becoming more organized and vocal in the North, a movement was afoot among many in the white population to isolate and marginalize them.

African Americans in Connecticut in the 1820s struggled with all of these transformations and dangers. While black communities emerged and strengthened in the 1820s, new contrary pressures also weighed on them. The state's free black population grew steadily in the new century's first decades, but its white population grew much more rapidly. In New Haven, for example, the free black population was 250 in 1800, 390 in 1810, and 625 in 1820. Over the following years this latter number remained roughly static. The white population, however, exploded. While it was a little less than 5000 in 1800, by 1810 it had reached 6800, by 1820, 8000, and by 1830, it was almost 11,000. This dramatic demographic growth fuelled the commercial expansion of New Haven and the rise of an important manufacturing sector, especially by the 1820s. While agriculture did not cease being an important economic activity for the state, the manufacturing of armaments, carriages, and other products was displacing the former

dominance of farming. Fairfield County demonstrated a similar pattern. While numbers of free black people grew there between 1800 and the 1820s, they could not keep pace with the rapid increase of whites. Agriculture had always predominated in the rich soil of Fairfield. However, manufacturing became much more important in the first half of the nineteenth century with the rise of the hat making industry in Danbury and Norwalk, metal working in Bridgeport, and shoemaking in Stamford. Throughout the state, numerous smaller towns and villages established small textile mills and foundries.

The rise of these new industrial enterprises relied exclusively on an abundant supply of white labor, both immigrant and native. The emerging industrial economy which was so central to Connecticut's prosperity in the nineteenth century afforded almost no opportunity whatsoever for African Americans. White laborers refused to work with their black kinsmen, thus barring the black Americans from industrial employment. A white laborer in New Haven in 1828 made this position dramatically clear:

*The white natives of New Haven have a right to be employed as laborers in every department of business to the exclusion of those who are black. And if the business of the city increases so as to afford employment for more laborers, white men have a right to come from abroad, and black men have no right.*

While William Lanson's enterprises offered some employment to a few local black workers, they could never offset the impact of racial exclusion in the expansive manufacturing economy. By the 1820s, black employees were increasingly confined to the most menial and poorly paid labor in the state.

By the 1820s, Lanson and other Afrodescendants in Connecticut as a whole were assailed in unprecedented ways. As the numbers of whites grew in the cities, local voters increasingly supported the removal of free black people on the grounds that they were

unfit for inclusion as free citizens. The American Colonization Society was the decade's leading proponent of this removal. In 1823, the Reverend Leonard Bacon, the most eminent Congregational minister in New Haven and the local leader of the ACS, summarized the case against free black people: "[T]here are in the United States 238,000 blacks denominated free, but whose freedom confers on them . . . no privilege but the privilege of being more vicious and miserable than slaves can be. Their condition . . . may be repeated in two words--irremediable degradation. Consequently they must be encouraged to remove to Africa."

In preceding years, powerful Congregational ministers like Jonathan Edwards, Jr., Levi Hart, and Timothy Dwight spoke out to defend black freedom and character. In the 1820s, the most powerful white moral voices appeared to disparage the black presence.

The enterprising William Lanson would be similarly assaulted. By the mid-1820s as New Haven prospered economically, the city required more space for residences and manufacturing shops. The little developed New Township afforded all the land the city needed for expansion. After 1825, new homes and businesses mushroomed there and Lanson's properties and tenants for the first time were harassed and denigrated. His dwellings were suddenly condemned as centers for vice in the city, overflowing with drunkenness, prostitution, and rioting. Most whites accused Lanson himself of being the ringleader of all this depravity, despite his publicly repeated denials and alternative characterizations of domestic life there. As a newly-affluent white resident requested in 1828: "Let the virtuous inhabitants of the Newtownship unite and purge this beautiful and rapidly improving section of our city from these defilements." Lanson, formerly praised as the state's promising paragon of American character, was now derided as the city's vice king. Pressured economically and socially, Lanson left his property in the center of

the new district and moved with many other black inhabitants to a new location near a deserted slaughterhouse in an isolated corner of the city. Even after his removal, a local newspaper continued to ridicule Lanson, his associates and other local people of color with accusations and racist doggerel

Throughout the 1820s, many in the state attempted to dismantle black freedom and character with unprecedented vigor and viciousness. Despite the continuing presence of Lanson's businesses and properties, the existence of black enterprise was scornfully denied. With a mounting vehemence and the full support of the decade's new Democratic Party, more whites spoke in favor of an America that was for whites-only. The American Colonization Society aided and abetted them.

Challenged and chafed, Connecticut's African Americans were undaunted. Their growing communities provided reinforcement and the foundation for new efforts they would organize in the 1830s.