

Historical and Archaeological Assessment Survey Long Wharf Pier Structure New Haven, Connecticut

In connection with environmental review studies of proposed I-95 improvements, the Connecticut State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) requested “information regarding the historic use, development chronology, and archaeological integrity of the Long Wharf pier structure” in New Haven, Connecticut.

In its present form, Long Wharf, which extends 700 feet into New Haven Harbor, is a concrete slab and



rip-rap structure that was created in the early 1960s in connection with a massive urban renewal project. The base of the modern wharf, however, is a stone and earth-fill structure built in 1810 by William Lanson, a prominent and sometimes controversial member of New Haven’s African American community. That structure was a 1,500-foot extension of an 18th-century timber wharf, making the whole, at some 3,900 feet, the longest wharf in the country at the time. The 1810 wharf is clearly visible at low tide, especially on the east side, where modern rip-rap was placed on top of the historic

masonry. On the west side, the 1810 masonry appears to have been partially displaced by the rip-rap. About 100 feet of the historic wharf is also visible beyond the south end of the modern structure.

Begun in the first half of the 18th century by a consortium of New Haven merchants, Long Wharf was a key component of the city’s commercial prosperity. Inns, warehouses, stores, and shipping offices crowded the surface of the wharf and extended beyond it into the harbor. New Haven’s custom house was at one time located just beyond the north end of Long Wharf in what was then known as Custom House Square. Ships from around the world discharged and took on cargo at the wharf, sustaining New Haven as one of Connecticut’s leading ports.

The wharf, formally known as Union Wharf but commonly called Long Wharf as early as the late 1700s, addressed a timeless geological force that constantly threatened the usefulness of New Haven harbor: the deposit of silt from the Quinnipiac River and other large streams. New Haven merchants were repeatedly forced to build out the wharf to reach water of sufficient depth to handle shipping. Toward the end of the 19th century, only the tip of the wharf could be used. By that time, much of the north end of the wharf (the pre-1810 part) had been filled in for railroad and other industrial purposes. Other wharfs were more useful for steamships and rail-to-ship transfer of goods, and Long Wharf steadily became obsolete.

In the early 1950s, the north end of the remains of Long Wharf were filled in to create a high embankment for the Route 1 Harborfront Relocation, a project that quickly became part of I-95’s predecessor, the Connecticut Turnpike. Project plans indicate that stone walls such as those visible at low tide beneath the present wharf structure lie intact under the highway fill.

AHS recommended that the remains of Long Wharf be considered an archeological resource that is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The wharf played a significant role in New Haven’s economic history, and it has an important historical association with the city’s African American community. Its remains also have the potential to shed light on early marine-engineering technology.