



STORIES SERIES Over two hundred years of history are tucked into the corners of this house and hidden among its fascinating families. Here is Story #9.

From time to time this series will share stories of the Linden Place mansion and the people and events connected to its history. We hope that you will enjoy the diversion and learn a little history about the families, the house, and its neighborhood.

The Nostalgia of Daniel Tanner and the Linden Place Barber Shop

“I think that history is the story of the past, with all the available facts, and that nostalgia is a fantasy about the past with no facts, and somewhere in between is memory.”

From “How The Word Is Passed” by Clint Smith



For over thirty years the docents at Linden Place have been sharing the story of Daniel Tanner, the black entrepreneur who ran his barber shop out of the octagonal conservatory/library. The story was first recounted by author George Howe in his book published in 1959, “Mount Hope, A New England Chronicle.” Right there, on page 248, he recounts that after the second owner of the house, William Henry DeWolf, died in 1853, leaving his wife Sarah to fend for herself, “she rented the octagon library to Dan Tanner, the Negro barber.” Howe embellished his story with a line by line description of the business placard placed on the front iron fence that touted the shop’s high end service. The innuendo could be easily drawn by his readers that a man descended from the very same Africans that the DeWolf business enslaved and brought to the Caribbean and North America paid rent that kept a roof over the head of Widow Sarah.

Linden Place wanted to know more about this remarkable man, Daniel Tanner, and so the search of primary source documents began. Yes, he was descended from an enslaved man. Yes, he was a barber. His brother was named Mark Anthony DeWolf Tanner, and ended up sailing to California during the Gold Rush. One census listed two young men living in the Tanner household, occupation ‘barber apprentice’. Mr. Tanner was a prolific advertiser as well. Each time he opened a new shop, or moved his business to a different part of town, multiple ads were placed in the Bristol Phoenix. But it was odd – not one mention of a location in the DeWolf House, the mansion that would not be called Linden Place until the mid 1860s. Three different searches confirmed no such mention and are listed below.

1. Here is a montage showing just a few of the advertisements in the local paper from 1842 to 1877. Mr. Tanner is clear on his location, on his services, and on the quality of his work. But nowhere – nowhere – does it mention a connection to 500 Hope Street and the DeWolf Mansion.



Daniel Tanner - ads and locations

2. A second book of local history much quoted in Bristol history is "Sketches of Old Bristol" printed in 1942 and edited by Charles O.F. Thompson. Well researched articles as well as recollections of many residents of the town were compiled. Individuals shared their memories of town history from the American Revolution to the early 20th century. Mr. Tanner appears in two or three of those stories. In each story his resilience, perseverance, talent and entrepreneurial spirit shines brightly. We learn about his gift as a "purveyor of clambakes." We learn that he was a musician, and taught young boys how to play the cornet, and that his band, the "Excelsior Cornet Band" marched in the Bristol 4th of July parade for many years. All of these stories were corroborated by articles in the Bristol Phoenix. But not one memory, not one article, mentioned any connection whatsoever to the DeWolf family or the house at 500 Hope Street. Not one.
3. Daniel Tanner became gravely ill and died shortly thereafter in 1884. Not one article about his illness, not one death notice, mentioned any connection to the house at 500 Hope Street or to the DeWolf family.

So, the question is, why did George Howe write about Tanner's barber shop at Linden Place? Did he make the story up from whole cloth? What was the point of the story if it were not true?

We know that the DeWolf House was leased to hotelier William Vars and operated under his direction as a hotel beginning in 1855. Around 1863 John F. Crump took over that business. In 1865 the building was sold to Edward Colt, the hotel addition came down, and the transformation into Linden Place began.

Although we cannot confirm this, one theory of the origin of the Tanner story is that the black barber Isaiah Davis, who had a shop across the street from the DeWolf House Hotel in 1863-1864, which he named Davis' DeWolf House Hair

Dressing Saloon, may have been the 'seed' that planted the idea of Daniel Tanner in the Gothic conservatory.

Another clue is to look carefully at the context of Mr. Howe's book, and especially the chapter that tells the story of the DeWolf family and Daniel Tanner. Entitled "The Decline of the Great Folks", Mr. Howe seems to take perverse delight in recounting what he calls the "collapse of Bristol" due to George DeWolf's bankruptcy in 1810, and in listing with gusto the myriad personal and business failures of William Henry DeWolf and the precarious position of his "heroic widow"

June 6, 1863

Isaiah Davis' DeWolf House Saloon
Opposite the DeWolf House
Upstairs, over Mr. Tilley's Dry Goods Store
1863
Isaiah Davis, Barber, black

Serial	Name	Age	Sex	Color	Occupation	Real Estate	Personal Estate	Reference	Married	Widowed	Location
	Almon L. Slocum	5	M	A							
78	Isaiah D. Davis	26	M	B	Barber		900				
	Isaiah D. Davis	30	M	B	Barber		300				
	Isaiah D. Davis	34	M	B	Barber						

because of his untimely death in 1853. Mr. Howe's description of Madame Theodora Colt as she "banished Dan Tanner's

Tonsorial Saloon from the Octagon” and her “restoration of the aristocracy in the village” seems to be recounted with only a mild attempt to suppress the author’s glee.

This situation leaves us with a lot of gaps, and a lot of questions. Did George Howe “weaponize” the Daniel Tanner story so he could use it against the DeWolfs in his narrative? Was the story told to diminish Tanner, or to diminish the DeWolfs? Interestingly, uncovering more about Tanner’s life has resulted in a story filled with examples of his talent, his business acumen, and his impeccable reputation. We are just now tracking down primary source documents listing many small dollar loans Mr. Tanner made to help build the free black community of New Goree around Wood Street. Here is the most interesting question: What does it say about the fact that the myth of Daniel Tanner in the conservatory has lived on at Linden Place - and in Bristol since Howe’s book was first published in 1959?

As Clint Smith traveled to Monticello, and Whitney Plantation, and Angola prison, and Galveston, and New York City while writing “How The Word Is Passed,” he learned about gaps – trying to fill them, and trying to understand them. So perhaps, as he writes in his book, the physical place is just an entry point to a much broader and richer history for all of us to learn. The physical place of the conservatory which never housed the barber shop of Mr. Tanner has served a more important purpose: as an entry point to uncovering more, learning more, understanding more, and appreciating more.



Image from “Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom” by Douglas Walter Bristol, Jr.

We are rejoiced to learn that we are at last to have a first class Hotel in Bristol. Capt. Wm. Vars, recently of the Bristol Ferry House, has leased the splendid mansion on Hope street, formerly the residence of the late Wm. Henry D'Wolf, Esq., and is immediately to fit it up for a hotel. A more pleasant, central or convenient location could not have been selected. The house is large and airy, and, with the addition of a few lodging rooms, will be equal, if not superior, to any other in the State. Capt. Vars is well known to the travelling public as a gentleman eminently qualified for a hotel keeper; attentive, agreeable, modest, and a good caterer. We are also pleased to learn that no bar will be kept, or liquors sold in the establishment; this fact of itself will recommend the house to those who may wish to sojourn among us for a season. We predict for Capt. Vars a full house and a prosperous career.

March 24, 1855
Bristol Phoenix

The DeWolf House.
This fine, first class hotel, under the excellent management of Mr. John F. Crump, will be in complete readiness for its summer boarders as early as the 20th of the present month. Everything indicates, thus far, that this house will have one of its most successful seasons this summer. Applications for accommodations are daily received by the proprietor and engagements have already been effected with a large number of visitors.
The house is in capital order and is furnished in excellent taste, with every desirable convenience; the tables are bountifully supplied with all the substantial comforts and luxuries that the markets of our beautiful town and the surrounding towns and cities can provide; every politeness and attention is paid to boarders and an excellent corps of servants and waiters are employed.
The price of board, although something above that of former years is still not in a ratio with the enormous advance of every article of consumption.
Mr. Crump will have a full house and we hope he will realize a remuneration equal to the amount of care and labor which he so faithfully bestows for the comfort and pleasure of his numerous patrons.

June 11, 1864
Bristol Phoenix

This article is written by Lynn Smith, volunteer and board member. Although not a trained historian, Lynn makes every effort to ensure that the information in the article is as accurate as possible. As always, suggestions, comments, corrections and input are welcomed.