

HOG RIVER JOURNAL

Destination

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James Pharmacy

Down Old Saybrook's main street, just past the bustling section of shops and restaurants, as the street begins to return to a quieter residential neighborhood, stands the James Gallery & Soda Fountain. Once the location of the James Pharmacy, owned by Anna Louise James, the first African-American female pharmacist in the state of Connecticut, the site has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1994. Though this former pharmacy and soda fountain is now a hobby shop and ice cream parlor, many of the original historic dark wood shelving and apothecary drawers of the turn-of-the-20th-century pharmacy remain behind the displays of rubber stamps, beads, and craft-making materials.



James Pharmacy c. 2006 .

photo: Hog River Journal

The soda fountain is small and intimate with its original long marble counter and delicate seashells and wire dragonflies that hang by the windows. An original James Pharmacy sign hangs low on the wall just inside the front entrance while a glass case in the back of the gift shop is full of artifacts. It contains old medicine bottles, glass ice-cream goblets, photographs, articles about the pharmacy, and books written by James's niece, the noted author Ann Petry. Taking a close look at the mementos allows you a peek into the time when 50 cents could buy you medicine and a life lesson from the town pharmacist.

Anna Louise James's father, Willis Samuel James, was a slave on a Virginia plantation who had escaped to Connecticut at age 16. Anna was born in Hartford in January 1886, but her family moved to Old Saybrook when she was a child. She became the first licensed African-American female pharmacist in Connecticut in 1908, after becoming the first African-American woman to graduate from the Brooklyn College of Pharmacy. In 1911, she joined her brother-in-law Peter Lane's pharmacy in Old Saybrook. Six years later, she took over the business, changing its name from Lane Pharmacy to James Pharmacy.

Though it would seem likely that an African-American woman might, in the early 20th century, have trouble gaining acceptance as a professional in a mostly white community, James apparently had no such trouble. Harriet Naughton, who lived near the pharmacy, was quoted in a 1996 Hartford Courant article about the pharmacist that “Miss James had the highest possible reputation. She was someone you could trust with your life, which you did, since she was a pharmacist...She was a civic personality, so to speak, and she had a role in town as Miss James the pharmacist.”

James was described by her niece and others in the Courant article as a reserved, hard-working woman who wore her hair pulled back into a tight bun. She hired local teenagers and held them to high standards, which required her to be strict at times. Despite her intensity and strong work ethic, James also had a soft side. She loved chatting with her customers, giving advice, and interacting with the children who came in for ice cream. It is said that she often gave medicine to those who could not afford it. Known as “Miss James” to everyone in Old Saybrook, she grew to become a well known and beloved member of the community. She retired and closed the drugstore in 1967 at the age of 81 but lived in the building until her death 10 years later. The pharmacy was reopened in 1984 but closed again in 1994. Since then, the building has traded hands several times.

The James Gallery & Soda Fountain is owned by the Deacon Timothy Pratt Bed & Breakfast, located next door to the former pharmacy. Though many things have changed, the soda fountain is still a place where families and friends can enjoy a variety of delectable treats. It was bustling the day I stopped in, and I knew that in order to capture the full experience of visiting the James Pharmacy, trying something from the large list of milkshakes and floats was essential. I ordered a delicious vanilla sundae topped with whipped cream and hot fudge, dubbed the “Miss James’ Dusty Rhodes Sundae” in honor of this local legend.

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The James Gallery & Soda Fountain, 325 Main Street, Old Saybrook, is open Monday, Thursday, and Sunday, noon to 6 p.m., Friday, noon to 8 p.m., and Saturday, noon to 10 p.m. Memorial Day to Labor Day, open seven days a week, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. For more information, call (860) 395-1222 or visit www.beautiful-impressions.com.