

Miss James, First Woman Pharmacist in CT Right in Old Saybrook

Anna Louise James seated, with a cat on her lap, in the pharmacy, ca. 1965-1975 - [Schlesinger Library](#), Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

By Tedd Levy for the Shoreline Times

Miss Anna Louise James was the first woman pharmacist in the state of Connecticut.

She was small woman with a soft voice, pulled back hair in a tight bun, and a stern face with deep furrows and rimless glasses. She had all the appearances of a no-nonsense, hard-working, unyielding spinster. But, she was much more.

For more than 50 years she was the kindly, caring, trustworthy, and universally cherished Miss James. From her pharmacy on Pennywise Lane in Old Saybrook she dispensed prescriptions to cure illness and sooth the hearts and minds of generations of Saybrook residents and visitors.

For generations of town's people she was employer, a sensible and sensitive confidant and adviser. For more than half a century she was the confidant and conscience of the community.

Miss Anna Louise James (1886-1977) gained a place in the history books for her "firsts" but, even before her death in 1977 at 91, became a lasting legend in the history of her town.

Her father was a slave on a Virginia plantation until he escaped at age 16 and headed north on the Underground Railroad. Settling in Hartford, he married Anna Houston in 1874. On January 19, 1886, Willis Samuel James and his wife Anna Houston welcomed the eighth of 11 children, Anna Louise.

Portrait of James, probably as a teenager, ca. 1900-1905 – [Schlesinger Library](#), Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

When she was 8 years old, Anna's mother died and she was raised by her father with help from her older sister Bertha and her husband, Peter Clark Lane. Soon after Anna graduated from Hartford's Arsenal Elementary School in 1902, the family moved to Saybrook where Anna attended the local high school and graduated in 1905.

Overcoming the bigotry of racism and sexism, she attended Brooklyn College of Pharmacy where she was the only woman in her class, graduating in 1908. The following year she became the first African American woman in Connecticut to be licensed as a pharmacist.

With the passage of the 19th amendment to the US Constitution in 1920 she became one of the first women to register to vote. It was neither easy nor common for an African American woman to successfully pursue a professional career. But, Anna recalled, "there were pharmacists in my

family as long as I can remember,” including her brother Fritz who operated a pharmacy in Old Lyme. Among the obstacles along her professional path was the Connecticut Pharmaceutical Association which rejected her application for membership because she was a woman and suggested she join the women’s auxiliary.

In the late 1890s at a time when discrimination was openly practiced and accepted, Peter Clark Lane (1872-1949) and Bertha James Lane (1875-1956), Anna James’ sister and brother-in-law, moved to Saybrook, population about 1,400 and nearly all white. He opened what was undoubtedly the first drug store in town. Bertha ran a business embroidering linens.

After graduating from Brooklyn, Anna Louise worked a short time in Hartford before returning to Saybrook in 1911 to join her brother-in-law in his drug store. In 1917 Peter returned to Hartford to accept a position with the Sisson Drug Company, a wholesale firm.

She became the sole owner in 1922 and changed the name to James Pharmacy. With Anna living upstairs, the pharmacy was open every day except half-days on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s. Everyone called her Miss James, including her niece Ann Lane, Peter and Bertha’s daughter, who worked in the store and later gained fame as Ann Petry (1908-1997), author of the important best seller *The Street*. More quietly known in her family as Louise, they were instructed to avoid the racist label of “Aunt Anna.”

James’ Pharmacy, Old Saybrook, ca. 1941 – [Schlesinger Library](#), Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

Miss James made improvements in the historic building, originally built by Humphrey Pratt in the 1790s as a general store for his tavern. Since tavern owners were expected to have supplies available for travelers, the small store served as a stop for the Boston to New Haven stage. The popular soda fountain was not added until 1896 by Peter C. Lane.

Over the years the building gained attention as the place where Lafayette made a purchase when he returned in 1824 to America on a triumphal tour and visit with old Revolutionary War friends. Evidence of his purchase seems to be lost and various stories claim that he bought wool stockings, or gloves, or saddle soap. The sign proclaiming his unknown purchase remains attached to the building as a unique and enduring advertisement.

The original Humphrey Pratt Store was located on the corner of Main Street and the Old Boston Post Road and then moved to Pennywise Lane. By the mid-1850s it was owned by James M. and Lucy Treadway. When James died he left the building to his wife, who rented it in 1895 to Peter Lane who opened his apothecary shop on the first floor.

A two-story wing was added in 1922 and in the early 1930s, architect Francis Nelson re-designed the building, adding the ice cream parlor and moving the entrance to face Pennywise Lane.

Miss James made extensive alterations, beginning in the mid-1920s, including the addition of the pharmaceutical motif in the front and the arcaded front extension on the wing. The interior includes display cases and glass-door cabinets, manufactured by the L.F. Dettenborn

Woodworking Company of Hartford, and installed in 1925. The popular soda fountain still has the Vermont granite counter and heart-shaped metal chairs and tables.

For her 80th birthday in January 1966, friends and family held a birthday party at the store. Some 250 showed up and there was an avalanche of cards, letters, flowers, and cakes from residents wanting to show their affection for her.

That evening members of the high school band played outside in the falling snow while the matronly guest of honor, with an orchard pinned on her pharmacy coat, accepted the many good wishes of young and old.

Then, in 1974 the Veterans of Foreign Wars honored her as Citizen of the Year, noting her generosity, hospitality, and compassion.

When she retired in 1967 she closed the pharmacy but continued to live upstairs until her death in 1977. Condolences flooded in to her nieces along with personal stories of her kindness, gentle guidance for youngsters, and caring attention to those in need. Her estate sold the building and it was sold again in 1984 to Garth and Kim Meadows who re-opened it as a pharmacy and kept the celebrated ice cream parlor. After the Meadows' sold in 1996 the building went through several changes in ownership.

Today it is owned by Richard Dunn who uses the upstairs rooms for his bed and breakfast and leases the first floor to Tissa's Moroccan Marketplace featuring Moroccan and Mediterranean food and products as well as traditional favorites from the soda fountain.

If visitors look carefully they'll see a display cabinet along the back wall with photos, medicine bottles, and memorabilia from the days when Miss James was there... and if you pause and reflect about the place you may feel the presence of a legend.

More about Ann Petry

Anna James on the steps of James' pharmacy, ca. 1915-1920 – [Schlesinger Library](#), Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

Peter and Bertha Lane had an apartment above the drug store and in 1908 a daughter Ann was born. After graduating from Old Saybrook High School she attended and graduated from the University of Connecticut's College of Pharmacy and returned to work for her aunt, Miss James, for several years.

In 1938 Ann Lane married George Petry and they moved to Harlem. Ann Lane Petry began writing about urban ghetto life for several African American newspapers. Using her New York experiences, she published her first novel, *The Street*, in 1946; it became a best seller and established her as a major literary figure. Over the course of her productive career she produced several other titles related to African American life and history and often included scenes set in drug stores.