

Historic “Ghost Sign” Restoration at Main and Sheffield Streets

To preserve the hand-painted finishes of historic advertising to prevent further disintegration and loss of yesteryear’s Main Street, Old Saybrook



Overall, approximate location of the three original signs.

Phase I of restoration completed.

Restoring signs of Old Saybrook’s yesteryear

These fading “ghost signs” on the Sheffield Building on Main Street in Old Saybrook are a nostalgic symbol of our enduring local merchants. But, time is taking its toll as it does to so much of our community’s memory. Our goal is to restore and recreate these historic hand-painted finishes.

The Project

The building was constructed by Amos Sheffield sometime before 1853. Since its original construction, the façade of the building has served as a form of signage, once a common form of advertisement. Today, ghosted images remain of ads for three of Old Saybrook’s long-standing businesses: Stokes Brothers grocery, Old Colony Package store and James A. Crowley Real Estate Agency.

With the current owner’s permission the Town retained John Canning & Co., a professional conservation firm, to make a visual inspection of historic documents and physical evidence of the building’s façade. The Town considered the treatment options recommended for how best



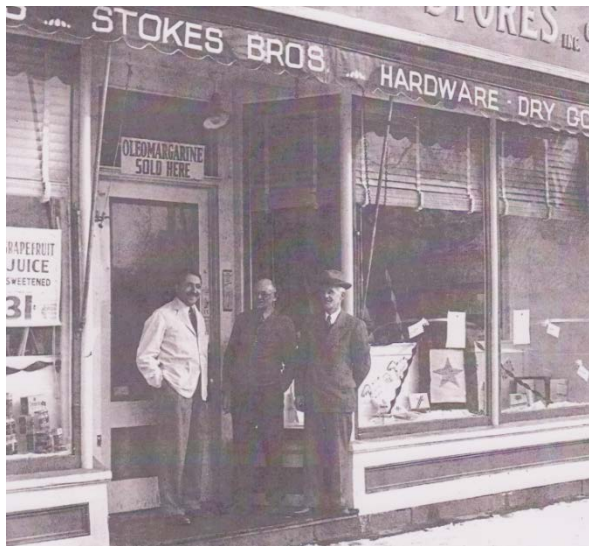
to conserve and then restore these historic, cultural resources to be more easily recognizable. The preferred course of action was to undertake appropriate chemical and physical treatments using the gentlest means possible before replacing missing features from the restoration period.



Historic image of original Stokes Bros. sign, circa 1950’s

This Place Matters

This brick building housed one of the original department stores in the area, the Stokes Bros. Store, which operated for 33 years, advertising itself as a place with “fancy groceries and fresh vegetables; hardware and paints.” Stokes Brothers provided a variety of groceries and goods that would be delivered directly to your home in a Ford truck. The products, however, were not the store’s sole purpose.



The building provided a place for you to pick up your mail, and while there, the upstairs of the store held the office of Dr. Wolfe, the only dentist in town. For many years it was a social center within the community. The location provided a place for people to sit around on pickle barrels and discuss whatever topics existed to talk about back in the day.

The scene of the institution as a social hub was memorialized in a 1909 New York Herald poem titled “In Stokes’ Grocery Store” by Saybrook author and humorist Jon Cone:

Say twenty-odd, or more,

Around the big, invitin’ stove

In Stokes’ grocery store...

Nearly every day, we pass by this former hub of commerce on our way to some place we care about- home, Town Hall, the cemetery, the middle school, the Town dock, the yacht club or friends at the senior housing. This building with its faded old signs, too, is a place we care about. A place that adds value to our life.

You, too, are a valuable resource!

Although this is our first fundraising campaign, this is not the first call from the community to “get better” at historic preservation *throughout* Old Saybrook. In recent years we’ve worked to influence nominations to the National Register of Historic Places, participated in telling the story of the Battle & Siege of Fort Saybrook, and we’ve begun to explore the preservation of historic structures and cultural sites in the face of climate change and sea level rise. We’d like to do more.

How you can help

To get started, the Historic District Commission (HDC) dedicated its small operating budget to this project. During the fall of 2020 the HDC participated in an online crowdfunding campaign on the Patronicity platform, made available through SustainableCT. This effort raised a total of \$10,230 from 94 local donors which was matched by Sustainable CT. A \$500 grant was also received from the Community Foundation of Middlesex County. Although the amount raised fell short of the goal, it was enough to allow one half of the sign to be restored, and Phase I was completed in the spring of 2021. The fundraising effort is ongoing to complete the restoration in Phase II of the project.

Donations to complete the restoration of the ghost sign are gratefully being accepted. Checks for the "Historic Ghost Sign" can be dropped off or mailed to Town Hall at 302 Main Street. We encourage you to get the word out by sharing this story on social media or telling a friend.

You can also purchase a tote bag to support the ghost sign restoration. These cotton canvas tote bags were designed and printed locally, and all proceeds will be donated to the historic ghost sign restoration effort. Go to homeportadventures.com to order or to find out where you can purchase the bags locally.

Thank You!!



An original Stokes Bros. Grocery Store shopping bag

For more information, please contact the Land Use Department at (860)395-3131 or Lwacker@oldsaybrookct.gov.