

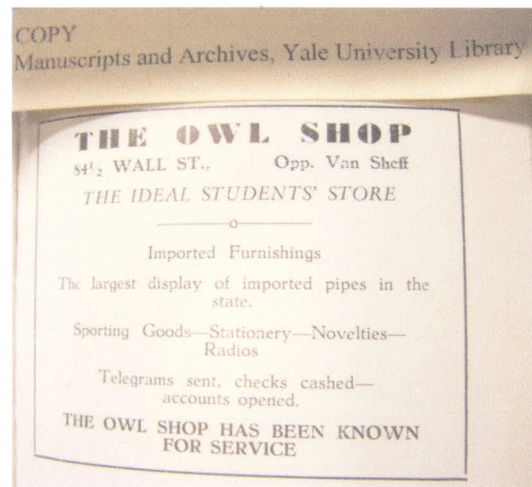
New Haven's Owl Shop:
The Evolution of a
Tradition

Casey L. Verkaamp
Professors Gitlin & Isenstadt
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"It's timeless, a classic that has stayed while the others have come and gone."

Stepping into the Owl Shop, located at 268 College Street, feels in many ways like stepping into the past. Sweet tobacco smoke (almost never encountered in public places anymore) fills a room in which slow-turning fans hang from a tin ceiling and music from the 1950s plays. The shop has been in New Haven since 1934, and while it feels like not much has changed since that time, underneath the Owl Shop's traditional atmosphere lie many evolutions that have been essential to the shop's continued success.

In 1934 John Arabolos and Joseph Ioannides, both of Greek descent (Ioannides immigrated to America in 1925 from Greece), opened the Owl Shop at 84 ½ Wall Street, between what is today Phil's Barber Shop (which was there by the late 1930s as well) and Naples Pizza (Directory, History). An advertisement in the 1936-37 Eli Book, the Freshman Handbook of old, bills the shop as "The Ideal Students' Store" and lists its specialties: imported furnishings, the largest display of imported pipes in the state, sporting goods, stationery, novelties, and radios. The Wall Street location is described in the advertisement as "Opposite Van Sheff" (145).



A volume entitled Maps of Yale and the Sheffield Scientific School from 1931 illuminates this last reference and helps to contextualize the Owl Shop's original location. The building directly across from 84 ½ Wall was the "Vanderbilt Scientific Hall No.1," a dormitory. Also in the quadrangle containing this dormitory were the buildings of the Sheffield Scientific School, hence the "Van Sheff" colloquialism. Today, Silliman College occupies this site (Figure 1).

One of the most exciting discoveries of my research was that just down Wall Street from The Owl Shop was a restaurant called George and Harry's, which opened in 1922. Alfred Dana wrote in his Collection that George Boulas was still in charge of the restaurant in 1944. I mused as I was looking through the Collection that John Arabolos and Joseph Ioannides must have been friends with the restaurateur with whom they shared Wall, particularly because Boulas is a name that also indicates Greek roots. I next looked up Joseph Ioannides in the 1934 New Haven City Directory and found, much to my surprise, that his home address was 90 Wall Street – the same as George and Harry's Restaurant! Joseph Ioannides must have lived above the eatery, which means that the photo displaying the restaurant from the Dana Collection also serves as a photo of the one-time residence of the owner of the Owl Shop (Figure 2).



Catherine, Mr. Ioannides' wife, says of the founding of the shop, "Joe was 22 then, and I was 17. It really began as a bookstore. My husband was straight out of Rutgers, and he thought he knew all about books. It was like a mini-Yale Co-op: typewriters, shoes, stationery, everything. But from the beginning, he was selling tobacco and mixing his own blends. He loved to smoke" (Beach). In 1937 Mr. Ioannides apparently acted on that passion. He and Arabolos opened a second branch of the Owl Shop at 86 College Street specializing in fine cigars, tobacco blends, cigarettes, and gentlemen's gifts; the 84 ½ Wall Street store remained a stationer (Eli Book, Directory).

The Owl Shop took on the image for which it is best known today in 1940, when the pair closed the Wall Street location and made tobacco their focus, with the 86 College Street

location as their home (Directory). Accordingly, the Owl Shop's advertising reflects this change; instead of projecting the "mini-Yale Co-op" image of 1934, by 1939 the shop had branded itself "New England's Finest Pipe Shop." It is clear that while its merchandise was more specific, the shop's scope was broader by the fourth decade of the twentieth century: geographically, it aimed to appeal far beyond New Haven, and demographically, it was no longer just for students. Catherine explains that the shop continued to expand after 1940, operating five stores at its peak. In 1951, however, the tobacconists decided to consolidate all of their merchandise under one roof and to relocate to the space at 268 College Street, where the shop has been ever since (Figure 3).

Amidst all of these shifts in location and merchandise, some interesting personal changes can also be unearthed. First, by 1947 Greek immigrant Joseph Ioannides had become Joseph St. John. According to (now) Catherine St. John (also of Greek descent), after her husband became a citizen, he decided he was tired of hearing people mispronounce his name, so he changed it (Beach). Second, after 1947 Joseph St. John became the sole



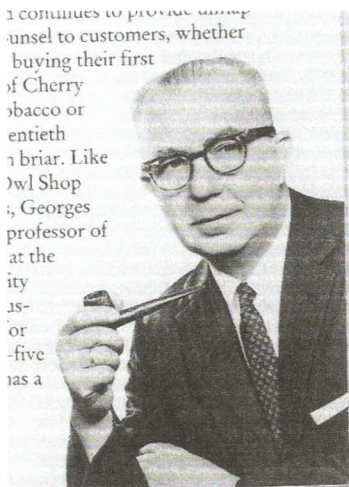
proprietor of the Owl Shop. His former partner, John Arabolos opened up Johnny's Pipe Center just a short distance away from the Owl Shop in that same year (Directory). Calling his store "Yale's Favorite Tobacconist" and still claiming the legacy of the original Owl Shop, Mr. Arabolos' advertising declares, "Serving Yale Men Since 1934" (Figure 4). Joe Lentine, who began working for Mr. St. John in 1964 at the age of 19, and who is today an

institution in his own right, recalls that Mr. St. John did not fight in World War II (due to a back problem), but believes Mr. Arabolos did. In some way, the force of this circumstance,

and not any animosity, may have contributed to the dissolution of Arabolos and St. John's partnership (Lentine).

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Owl Shop flourished and was known as one of the foremost tobacconists in the country, doing a large volume of mail-order business that included, for example, shipping its custom-blended tobaccos like "Harkness Tower blend," to all fifty states (Beach, see Figures 5 and 6). Additionally, the Shubert Theater, called "the birthplace of the nation's hits," brought much glamour to New Haven – and business to the Owl Shop. One might have seen Edward Robinson, Vincent Price, Van Johnson, Alec

Guinness, Rex Harrison, Olivia de Havilland, or Helen Hayes visiting the tobacconist



(History). In 1977, however, the Shubert closed and in that same year Mr. St. John passed away. He left behind quite a legacy, though, through his shop and those upon whom he exerted influence, like Joe Lentine, who continue to pass on his values. According to Mrs. St. John, "[Her husband] got along with all kinds: the high, the mighty, and the low." Joe Lentine echos these values in 2008, saying that tobacco is a "great

equalizer," and that the purpose of the Owl Shop has always been, "...to be a place where people from all walks of life can come in, relax, and enjoy" (Beach, Lentine).

In addition to the closing of the Shubert and passing of Mr. St. John, by the second half of the twentieth century, the health consequences of smoking were becoming more apparent; Americans would only grow increasingly health-conscious from this time on. Thus, the Owl Shop, like any strong institution, had to adapt. In 1998 Glen Greenberg bought the business from Mrs. St. John and soon acquired a liquor license with the hopes of turning the shop into something slightly different. Despite the protests of some, Mr.

Greenberg went ahead with his plans to revamp the smoke shop (Savona). Today, it features a richly appointed smoking lounge and fully-stocked bar and stays open late at night, while maintaining its reputation as one of the last, best, quality tobacco shops in the country (History). As an additional

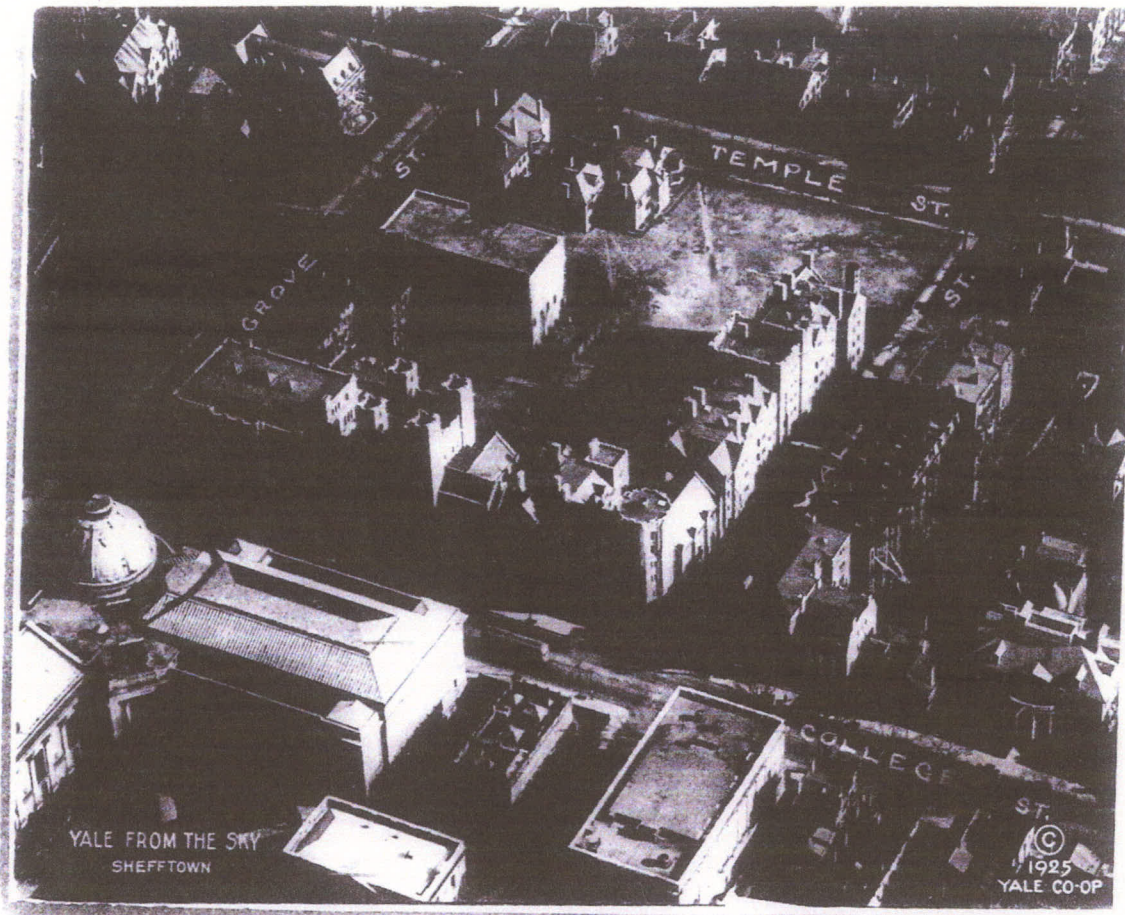


draw, following the 2004 Connecticut smoking ban, from which the shop was immune due to a grandfather clause, the Owl Shop is now the only place in the state where one can both smoke and drink (Lentine, Savona).

More recently, the Owl Shop has added another distinct nod to the future with an upscale coffee bar in the front corner of the store. Mr. Lentine says they plan to begin serving sandwiches as well. The same individuals who yelped at the prospect of a bar in the Owl Shop might run screaming from the possibility of paninis, but these changes – like the original change of the Owl Shop from stationer to tobacconist, which gave the shop its identity – all seem to be part of a necessary evolutionary process in the life-cycle of this Yale and New Haven institution. I can personally attest to the fact that despite the changes made, the shop retains the traditional feel with which it must have been imbued ever since Mr. St. John opened his doors in 1934. I believe that the Owl Shop will continue to be a vibrant business as it changes to match the evolving marketplace, and hope that the unique, traditional atmosphere that defines it will always remain.

Relevant Figures

Sheff Town from the air in 1925.



Birdseye view of Wall and College Sts. in 1925.

Many of the buildings shown on Grove, Temple, and Wall Sts. were removed to make way for Silliman and Timothy Dwight Colleges.

Figure 1

This photo of "Sheff Town from the air in 1925" is from the New Haven Historical Society's Dana Collection. The building at 84 ½ Wall, across the street from Sheff Town, that would become home to the Owl Shop is certainly one of these in the photograph.

(As an aside, I also discovered in the Dana Collection that numbers 82 through 88 Wall Street housed Yale Eating Clubs in the 1870s. Number 84 Wall Street, which (half of, at least) would become the Owl Shop in 1934, housed "S.S.S. The Etansville Club".)

November, 1944.

The Re-Opening Of "The Original" George And Harry's Restaurant, Established In 1922
At No. 90 Wall Street, Between Temple And College - George Boulas Still In Charge.

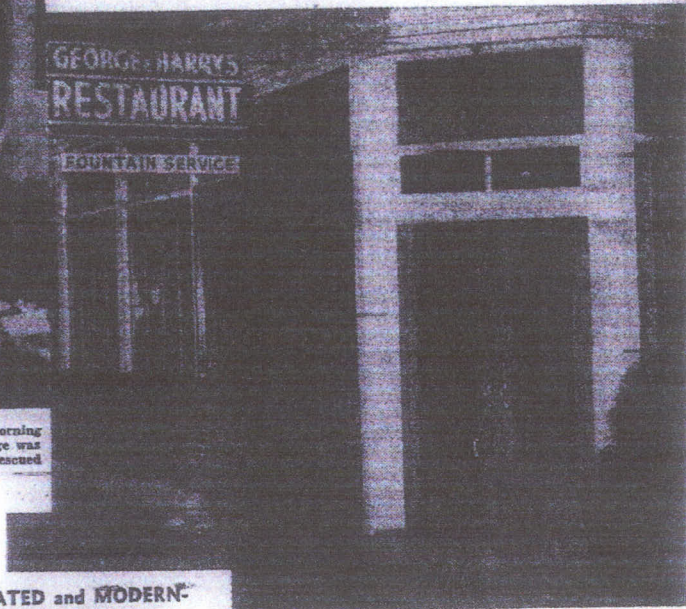
is No Breakfast At George & Harry's



stove in George & Harry's Restaurant, 85 Wall Street, this morning
to the premises at 85, 88 and 90 Wall Street. Most of the damage was
app in an upstairs apartment by smoke and flames, had to be rescued

N.H. Reg. July 1, 1944.

RE-OPENING



COMPLETELY RENOVATED and MODERN-
IZED, PRESENTING A QUAIN and
HOMELIKE ATMOSPHERE

SERVING THE
BEST IN FOOD
EXCELLENTLY PREPARED



Figure 2

George and Harry's Restaurant at its 90 Wall Street location. Mr. Joseph Ioannides lived above the restaurant in 1934, just down the street from his own Owl Shop at 84 1/2 Wall.

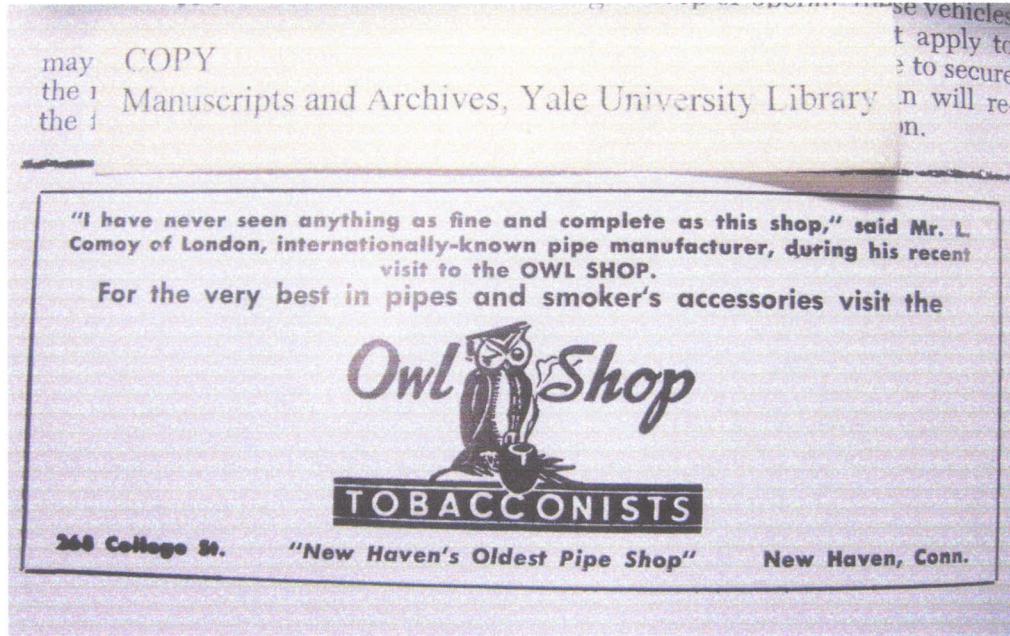


Figure 3

An advertisement from the Eli Book of 1951 – the first instance of the shop using this logo, which it uses to this day.

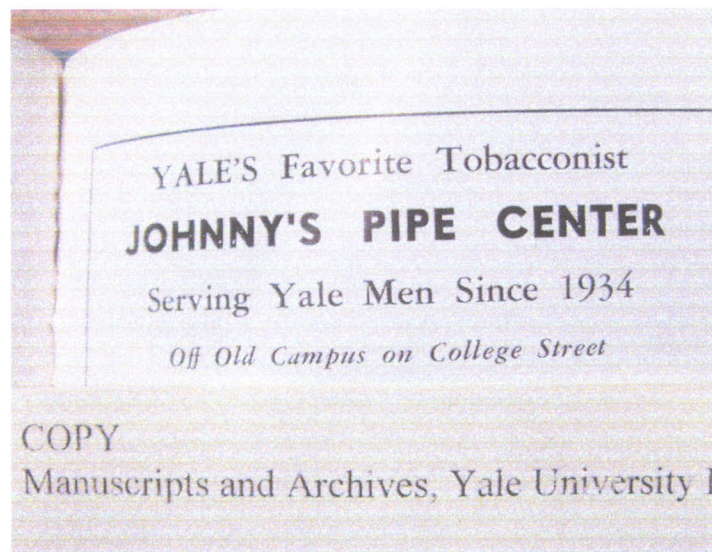


Figure 4


An advertisement from the 1953-54 Eli Book for the pipe shop opened by John Arabolos at 104 College Street in 1947, just a few doors down from Joseph St. John's Owl Shop.

**CLASS
PIPES**

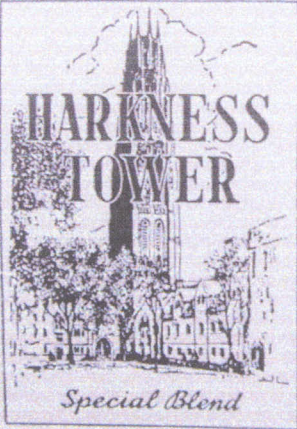
*Inlaid with Sterling
Silver*

Y Inlaid at \$1.00
With numerals \$1.50

*Make Your Class Pipe
the Useful Souvenir
of a Lifetime*



FREE !
Bring in your sour, bitter pipe with this advertisement and have it sweetened and reconditioned.



**HARKNESS
TOWER**

Special Blend

- Smoke "Harkness Tower" — America's Finest Pipe Tobacco — No artificial flavoring — No tongue bite — cool, fragrant, mild and pleasing. The favorite mixture on the Campus.
- Expert pipe repairing and reconditioning done on premises.

OWL SHOP
86 College St. Opp. Hotel Taft

COPY
Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library

Figure 5

An advertisement from the 1941-42 Eli Book that highlights both the tradition of providing Yale seniors with custom pipes upon graduation and the Owl Shop's famous "Harkness Tower" blend of tobacco.

Display Ad 252 -- Title
The Hartford Courant (1927-1984), Nov. 28, 1954, p. B1A

**Finest
pipe tobacco
you can smoke**

W.B.'s No 3
(original)

has no artificial flavoring—
it is so delightfully mild and
smooth you'll enjoy smoking
it all day.

ORDER NOW
for Yourself and
for Christmas Giving



Specify wt.
and amount

1 lb.
\$1.85
1/2 lb.
\$0.90
—Postpaid

Blended-cured-packaged at
THE OWL SHOP
94 College St., New Haven,
Conn.

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____

Conn. Res. add 3% sales tax.
Check or Money Order-postpaid

Figure 6

An advertisement from the Hartford Courant of November 28, 1954.

A note on advertisements: According to Joe Lentine, the Owl Shop advertised in publications like the Wall Street Journal and New Yorker when its mail-order business was booming.

Digital searching of these publications' archives yielded advertisements for the publications themselves, which listed firms that had advertised with them. The Owl Shop is on the lists, but I was unable to find the shop's actual advertisement.

I tried searching through these publications' microfilm records at strategic time periods, but not having an exact date made this difficult, and I was still unable to turn up the Owl Shop's advertisements.

Nevertheless, I know that the Owl Shop did indeed advertise in these publications and can speculate that their advertisements may have looked something like this one to the left from the Hartford Courant.

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