

A Saloon in Southold?!

Nineteenth-century Southold Town, a strong-hold of temperance, did approve of a particular kind of saloon—the *oyster* saloon. German immigrant Charles Barth advertised oysters in 1872, prepared stewed or raw. Response was enthusiastic because two years later, he'd rebranded his business as an *oyster saloon* “prepared to serve oysters in every style.” He reminded customers that no *refreshments* would be served on Sunday, suggesting that the saloon-keeper sold beer and liquor the other six days of the week.¹

Soon, Barth had competition.² In 1874, Alfred Vail converted a billiard room in the basement of the brick store on Main Street to an “oyster, sugar, and confectionary saloon.”³ That brick store today houses the Southold Historical Museum offices. Vail's father-in-law, Philip Cantermen, took over the business and put his stamp on it. Female patrons were instructed to enter at the rear of the building, while ads announced, “This is an old established saloon, where everything is kept decent and in order, and where lady or gentlemen visitors are treated with respect.”⁴ Clearly, Cantermen desired a more genteel clientele compared to those who frequented oyster saloons in Greenport known for raucous club dinners and drunken brawls.⁵

All social classes enjoyed eating oysters. They were a cheap, nourishing food, readily available outside of meal times, and required only a bucket to gather. Oyster saloons were located in cool basements and shared top billing seasonally with ice cream. Preparations were simple—raw, stewed, or fried. Cantermen's inventory of perishable items—oysters in months including the letter “R” (or ice cream in months that didn't), confections, and baked goods—was perhaps a deliberate choice to complement the inventory of Prince's dry goods store directly above.⁶ With its diverse array of products, the brick store complex became a social hub, promising to transform a dull shopping trip into a pleasurable afternoon of dawdling, noshing, and gossiping.

Philip Cantermen sold the business to J. B. Young who then sold it to Hugh Booth, a junk dealer from Sag Harbor. Booth relished his new career which lasted into the 20th century.⁷ From a simple idea, Vail's oyster saloon grew to become a popular Southold fixture for more than twenty-five years, offering bivalves from Mattituck Creek, Horton's Point, and Peconic Bay, but never ever Blue Points from the south shore.

¹ Born in Baden Germany, Charles Barth appeared in the 1860 Federal census at Southold; his occupation was saloon-keeper. I assumed Barth's saloon sold alcohol given his native culture's fondness for beer. *Long Island Traveler*, November 14, 1872, page 3; January 2, 1873, page 3; January 22, 1874, page 3.

² Competitors included a seasonal oyster saloon in the basement of [widow] Barth's house, kept by J.M. Cochran Sr., a second seasonal oyster saloon located in the basement of the Cochran house, kept by Edwin D Goldsmith, and the Belmont Oyster Saloon, kept by F.S. Teague. *Long Island Traveler*, November 8, 1887, page 4; February 19, 1886, page 6.

³ *Long Island Traveler*, December 3, 1874, page 2. The previous December, Michael Stelzer advertised the sale of one nearly new billiard table, three tables and chairs. No location was provided, but it was notably a private sale, not auction (*Long Island Traveler*, December 11, 1873, page 3).

⁴ *Long Island Traveler*, December 25, 1879, page 2.

⁵ *Long Island Traveler*, November 18 and 25, 1875, page 3; February 12, 1886, page 2.

⁶ Although Cantermen sold tobacco, cigars, nuts, and at Christmas time, toys; all of which could be found in certain dry goods stores. It's unknown if Cantermen and Prince coordinated their inventory, but unlikely Prince would have rented out his basement to a retailer in direct competition with him.

⁷ *Long Island Traveler*, October 8, 1897, page 1; November 12, 1897, page 3. The earliest and latest dates cited in this article depended on available issues of the *Long Island Traveler* at www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org. Charles Barth may have started selling oysters in his saloon prior to 1872. Likewise, the fate of Booth's oyster saloon after 1897 is unknown. Federal censuses show his occupation in 1900 as restaurant proprietor and in 1910 as proprietor of fruits and candy.

