CHAPTER VII — SOUTH UNION STREET

John Godfrey Saxce was born June 2, 1816 in Highgate, Vermont. He graduated from Middlebury College in 1836, read law at Rockport, New York and at St. Albans, Vermont where he was admitted to the bar in September 1843. He married Sophia Sollace as 1841. The next seven years Saxce practiced his profession in northeastern Vermont. He also served Franklin County as Superintendent of Schools 1847-48.

In 1850 Saxce moved to Burlington and for ten years resided in the house built by him, now #177 South Union Street.

Saxce lived a quiet life in Burlington. Domestic in his tastes, he was supremely happy in his home surroundings. He stood six feet two inches tall and commissioned a lounge to be made especially to accommodate his great height. After supper, clad in a dressing gown and slippers, he often threw himself upon it to relax.

Gradually Saxce spent more time on his writing and less on his law practice. With this growing love of literary work, he began to find the law insodome and he often expressed the intention of giving it up as soon as he could find a more congenial means of earning a living. As a lawyer, his practice was never large and he had been more interested in the care for by ex-Lt. Governor Levi Underwood.

The looked-for opportunity to remove the law arrived when in 1851 he purchased the Burlington Democratic newspaper, the Vermont Sentinel. The unexpected result of this purchase involved Saxce in the politics of the day. During the term 1850-51 he served as Chittenden County State’s Attorney and was also for a short time Deputy Collector of Customs.

Saxce did not attempt to make the Sentinel a power in politics, yet he certainly enjoyed his editorial labors.

In the campaign of 1859-60 Saxce was nominated Democratic candidate for Governor of Vermont v. re-election against Hiland Hall. The nomination, purely complimentary, as the Democratic Party never gained sufficient strength in the 19th century to elect an effective candidate, was considered by Saxce to be a joke. In acceptance of the nomination he wrote a short letter and his sense of humor crops up when he closes the brief note with these words: “For further political views and opinions I will refer you to my inaugural message.”

Saxce gained a Vermont reputation as a wit, satirist, and after-dinner poet, and the humorous poems he contributed to the Knickerbocker and Harper’s Weekly prepared way toward the volumes of verse, 1850, 1860, 1862, 1865, 1866, 1872, and 1874. For many years Saxce enjoyed his position as one of the most widely read and frequently quoted of American poets.

Much in verse, Saxce was less a poet than a humorist using verse as his medium.

Because of his popularity as a lightly satiric poet and humorous speaker, Saxce soon aban- doned the Sentinel as a source of income. In 1856 he sold the paper and trusted to literature for a living and through economical treatment of his income, Saxce acquired means affording him the opportunity for leisure and travel. Extremely popular as a lyric and university lecturer, he traveled from Maine to Missouri and throughout the South.

Although no longer editor after 1856 Saxce continued to write a column in the Sentinel affording him space for jokes and whimsical observations.

In 1860 Saxce decided to move to Albany, New York. The Burlington Free Press of May 22, 1861 announced:

We are sorry to learn that our townsmen, J.G. Saxce, Esq., is to be no longer such. He has purchased a handsome residence on Capital Hill in Albany, where he will reside in the neighboring city of Troy, his mother and brothers reside, and will in a day or two remove his family and household goods thither.

He purchased a house on Maiden Avenue nearly opposite the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Saxce made his home in Albany from 1860 to 1872 and then moved to Brooklyn, New York.

The latter days of the poet differed considerably from his former pleasant happy life at Burlington. Fame, friends and fortune departed from him. Badly injured in a railroad accident, he never was well again. His wife and all except one of his children died within a brief period. Melancholia overcame him and Saxce became a recluse, brooding over this troubles.

The man who made thousands laugh — for he was a great gentle wit in his day — spent the last years of his life in the deepest depression. When he died March 31, 1887 many were surprised to learn of his passing, because they had thought Saxce had left this world long before, so little had been heard of him.

The Free Press of April 16, 1864 noted: S.S. Smith has bought John G. Saxce’s former residence on Union Street for $1,800.

Who lived here from 1861 to 1864? We have no way of knowing. It is probable that Saxce rented it out during this period.

M.S. Smith later lived at #177 South Union Street.

Little is known of Sidney S. Smith who lived at #177 South Union Street from 1864 to 1870. He was street commissioner 1869-70 and the city directory of 1871-72 lists him on Grant Street.

M.E. Meacham lived at the residence from 1872 to 1881. Born Mary Frances Gilford she was the eldest of the five children of Ira Gilford of Middlebury. Mary attended Middlebury Young Ladies Seminary, and married James Meacham in 1844. She moved to Burlington about 1860. Brainard Kellogg, ed- itor of the Middlebury Register & Journal wrote February 6, 1885:

I met Mrs. Meacham in 1867 . . . She was a woman of business, who could buy and sell property.

While in Burlington Mrs. Meacham was a member of the Board of Trustees of the House for Destitute Children 1869-73 and assistant corresponding secretary in 1874.

During Mrs. Meacham’s residence at the South Union house, the second Episcopal Bishop of Burlington, William Henry Augustus Bissell (1863-1893) also lived here from 1873 to 1876.

Mrs. Meacham sold the house in 1882 and went to live with her daughter in Detroit where she died December 30, 1884.

Marcus D. Cook, who owned a Church Street dry goods and carpet store, is listed in the house 1883 to 1893. In the latter year he moved to Denver where he died in 1913.

Charles Wildfleed Waterman was a student at the University of Vermont 1881-85 and while there he met and courted Cook’s daughter, Anna. He went to Denver in 1889 to practice law and on June 18, 1900 married Anna. UVM’s Waterman building was named in honor of this couple.

Joseph G. Bellows, a Church Street druggist, lived at #177 South Union from 1893 to 1917 when he moved to Watertown, New York. During this time the house was owned by J.H. Lindley and then by his widow, at least until 1927. In 1918 it became an apartment build- ing.

GILFORD HOUSE

The Vermont Historic Sites Survey has one sentence about this house:

This beautifully situated Greek Revival house is distinguished by its ornate Inmanate entrance.

Built in the 1830s, the Inmanate porch entrance was added about 1850.

Nothing is known about Gilford, the name listed next to the house on the 1857 map of Burlington.