

2 Sisters Arminda and Eliza Guernsey

This is the story of 2 Vermont sisters, Arminda and Eliza Guernsey, born in the 1800s in Calais, Vermont. They are not famous, and details about them are scarce, but their story is interesting in so many ways. I stumbled upon a little corner of it while researching the White family of East Montpelier who were migrating west as so many did at that time.

Every search of newspapers added more complexity to the story of the sisters until I felt they deserved their own spot light. My process of discovery involved sources such as Vermont vital records, old maps of Montpelier from 1853, 1858, 1873 and 1884, US census records, and local newspaper articles. Also I use the Childs Directory from 1889. A valuable resource that knits their story together is an article about Eliza in an 1889 *Vermont Watchman and State Journal* article - "An Odd Vermont Character", written six years before her death. I reference from this article several times, noting quotes from the author - "Templeton".

Hubbard Guernsey and Lucy (Redway) started their married life in Calais Vermont in 1816. They had five daughters, **Arminda (1818-1889), Eliza V. (1821- 1895), Sarah F.(1823-1874, Lucy A.(1825-1844) and Phoebe(1830-1877)**. The girls were born in Calais and their parents later moved to Worcester at the corner of Hampshire Hill Rd and Hancock Brook Rd near a school and a sawmill on Hancock Brook. ¹

Arminda Guernsey

First let's follow Arminda, the oldest. In 1838 She married Joel T. White(1818-1877), son of Suel White who lived in the brick house that is now 720 Templeton Rd in East Montpelier. Joel had a window sash and blind business² in East Montpelier across from his father's house on a brook that had several mills on it. Two mill ponds remain. They had seven children between 1840 and 1856. A baby every two years was common in those days. Their children: **Corilla 1840-1926, Sarah 1844-1882, Eliza 1846-1876, Henry L. 1847-1880, Emma Amanda 1849-1937, Lucy R. 1855-1859, George H. 1856 -1891**. In 1855 Arminda's oldest Corilla, age 14, married Lester Hoadley(1832-1917), age 23 from Moretown and they set off by oxcart, boat, and possibly train, on a pioneer's journey to Wisconsin. The young couple was on the move like so many Vermonters of that time, when newly opened lands to the west offered a chance for a better life. In that year Joel sold the sash and blind business to his brother in law Hazen Bailey Lyford from Cabot, who was Joel's sister Electa's husband.³ Arminda quickly gave birth to Lucy R. in 1855 and then George H. in 1856. Joel's father died in 1857. The family was on the brink of big changes.

Arminda and Joel fell apart and there are clues as to how. Her sister Eliza Guernsey, an unmarried milliner in Montpelier, sued Joel White for support payments in January of 1858, the first hint of a fracture in the family. The Whites had arrived in Oakfield, Wisconsin south of Fon Du Lac and Lake Winnebago by 1858. Some of the small children were on that grueling trip and some weren't.

¹ H Guernsey shows on the 1858 Wallings map

² Sash = wooden window mullion | blind = interior wooden window slat blind

³Note the historic "Bailey Hazen" Rd reference in his name.

Was Arminda with them? I don't think so. Once in Oakfield their daughter Lucy R. died of diarrhea in 1859 at age 4. But sadly and surprisingly so did another baby in Oakfield, of an unknown cause at 6 months of age: Freddie E. White that same year, born to Joel's new wife Cevilla (1835-1923) 24, sister of Corilla's husband Lester Hoadley. What happened? Here's what I think happened. Arminda may have been unstable in Vermont after the birth of George in 1856. Joel met Cevilla around the time that her brother Lester and his daughter Corilla were heading to Wisconsin. Joel and Cevilla ran off with some of the children leaving Arminda in Vermont with the others. I don't know if there was an actual divorce, but several 1860 town censuses clarify the situation:

Arminda and her daughters Emma Amanda White, 10 and Eliza White, 14 were now staying with Arminda's sister Eliza Guernsey back in Montpelier, who also had 3 young women in her house, possibly seamstresses. And Arminda had had a nervous breakdown. The census lists her as "pauper and insane". Eliza would go on to adopt Emma Amanda, the only child of Arminda's who would stay in Vermont. So the funds Eliza sued Joel for were to aid his broken family. 4 year old George H, the youngest, was in Worcester with his grandparents Hubbard and Lucy Guernsey. Eliza White and George H. White soon joined with the rest of the family in Wisconsin. Joel is listed in the Fond Du Lac as "Mechanic" in 1860 and "Superintendent of Planing Mill in 1870.

Eliza Guernsey

Who was Eliza at that point just before she took on two children and her "crazy" sister? Remember Templeton our chronicler of Eliza's life? Templeton described her as "an extraordinarily handsome girl....the belle of the capital..." when she was young. She showed up in the early 1850s newspapers, first winning awards for her embroidered mantillas (shawls) and millinery (hats) at the Vermont State Fairs in Montpelier. Her sewing and millinery business was the largest in town, employing 15-25 women, with customers spread over several counties. I'm not sure if Templeton is exaggerating but I'll go with it.

In 1856 Eliza was in the paper again for a bizarre reason. "A serpent appeared in Eden" according to Templeton. She became the 7th wife and victim of a serial bigamist named L. Abbot, alias Dr Abby from Sidney New York. She had the marriage annulled and Mr Abbot went to prison for the 7th time. He wrote his book *Seven Wives and Seven Prisons* sometime later. According to him Eliza was "agreeable, good-looking and intelligent, and what the vernacular calls "smart" ". Since she was quite old for this to be her first marriage we are left to wonder why this was her only very flawed attempt at marriage. You could guess that Dr Abby broke her heart, but I like to think she was just a free spirit who had no need for bossy spouses. I have run across other bigamy cases in my research of Washington County, and have no idea how common they were, but surely Dr Abbott took it to an extreme.

The flurry of gossip about the bigamy case damaged Eliza's reputation, and her sewing business waned. There was a fair amount of judgment being meted out in *Danville North Star*: "This lamentable case of depravity and wretchedness, which has recently produced not a little excitement and public indignation in our community, should even prove a salutary warning to others: to all unmarried ladies, young or old,

to be particular in regard to their acquaintances with, and knowledge of the character and reputation of the men who may make proposals of marriage to them." What a way to blame the victim.

Loss & Burdens

In the 1860s Arminda spent 4 years at the Brattleboro Asylum for the Insane. Eliza advocated for her, taking to the newspaper to complain about the director who refused to let Eliza see Arminda in her room during visits, raising Eliza's suspicions as to her situation. She also attended a hearing at the State House about complaints against the director. Arminda was sent to Minnesota to be cared for by family. I find an 1870 census record for the Minnesota Hospital for the Insane with an "Amanda White" aged 51 and born in Vermont. There's a good chance that was Arminda since her name was misspelled often in records, and there was family living in the area. But Eliza soon went out to Minnesota and brought her home.

Eliza was experiencing family losses. Her father Hubbard died in 1866, and her mother Lucy moved in with Eliza's sister Sarah Bulkely and her family in Moretown where Lucy died in 1872. Sarah died of consumption in 1874. The 1860 census shows Eliza's sister Phoebe was living with her parents and then with Eliza in the 1870s according to Templeton. "Aunt Phoebe, as she was generally known, was then almost blind, and soon became entirely so. She was also of weak intellect to a certain degree." She died around 1877.

In the 1880s Eliza fought for resources to take care of Arminda. The fight ended up in the Vermont Legislature and she received funds from Montpelier and East Montpelier after a struggle that ranged over many years. She had the bigger picture in mind and made her opinions known. Templeton said it best: "She was a monomaniac on the subject of private asylums. Session after session she has been a familiar figure about the halls of the Capitol, lobbying for the passage of a bill that would embody her ideas on the subject ..."

In 1881 Eliza and Arminda embarked on a train trip to visit the long gone family, now in Long Prairie Minnesota. I can imagine Eliza walking down East State St and entering the Vermont Watchman & State Journal office on Main St to tell the story that resulted in this article. I wonder who wrote it:

"Miss Eliza Guernsey, who has recently returned from a trip to Minnesota, whither she took her Insane sister, Mrs. White, relates a pleasing incident which occurred on the journey. The trip to Chicago was made in an ordinary passenger car, but upon starting thence for St Paul it was determined to take a palace car for the sake of rest and comfort. The car was new and the finish and ornamentation exceptionally beautiful and attractive. After being seated Mrs. White gazed long and intently upon the lovely surroundings, and finally inquired, in a suppressed voice: "*Eliza, have you seen Sister Sarah since you came?*" "*Why, no,*" Eliza replied: "*you know Sister Sarah died several years ago.*" "*Yes, I know: but haven't you seen her since you got here? And haven't you seen father and mother?*" "*No,*" Eliza replied; "*you know they both died many years ago.*" "*Yes, that I know very well,*" rejoins Mrs. White, "*but are they not here?*" Then it flashed upon Eliza's mind that her unfortunate sister imagined she had reached that beautiful home where the curse should be lifted, and she should "see as she was seen and know as she was known." And during the remainder of the long journey the charm of the surroundings was unbroken, and the unfortunate lady enjoyed a season of refreshing sleep and repose which she had not known for years."

Arminda's reality was that of her 7 children, 1 died as a toddler, 3 died in their 30s and only Corilla, her oldest and George H, her youngest were still alive of the pioneers out west. She must have visited many graves. George would live to 44 and Corilla was the only pioneer to live to old age - 86. Emma Amanda, who had remained in Vermont, would live to 89 living a quiet life, married to Levansaler Walker, a marble dealer, on Maple St in Burlington. They had no children. See her house in figure 17.



Figure 1. #48 East State St -Eliza's first E State St house

The 1870s - The Houses

Eliza's houses are characters in and of themselves in my mind. Around 1872 after she gave up her failing sewing business she built a new house at the corner of E State St, now #48. (Figure 1 above).



Figure 2. 1873 Beers Map Section

The 1873 Beers Map (Figure 2 left) shows Main St in the upper left corner, and E State St (in tan area) runs diagonally down to Hubbard. Cedar St is not named. It goes from E State St to School St with J Poland written in.

The house on the corner of Cedar St (#48) is marked G Guernsey, but I think that is a mistake and it should be an E for Eliza. Neighbor Dr G.M. Brigham's 2 buildings (Figures 9 & 10) are on the last page.

Eliza started making a living running the house as a tenement. The census lists boarders: Achsah Keeler and her 2 children and Sarah Hurley, both "tailoresses".

Templeton said Eliza was adding to her house, making it look like "The House of Seven Gables", referencing Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1851 novel.

Life on the Street

This 1874 picture (Figure 3 below) shows #83 Main St, home of the FREEMAN OFFICE (old Coffee Corner). To its left was “the arch building” (with the sign (F)URNITURE) because it had a drive-through to the “State Street Extension”, the current E State St. That is why the current intersection is not a standard 4 corners.

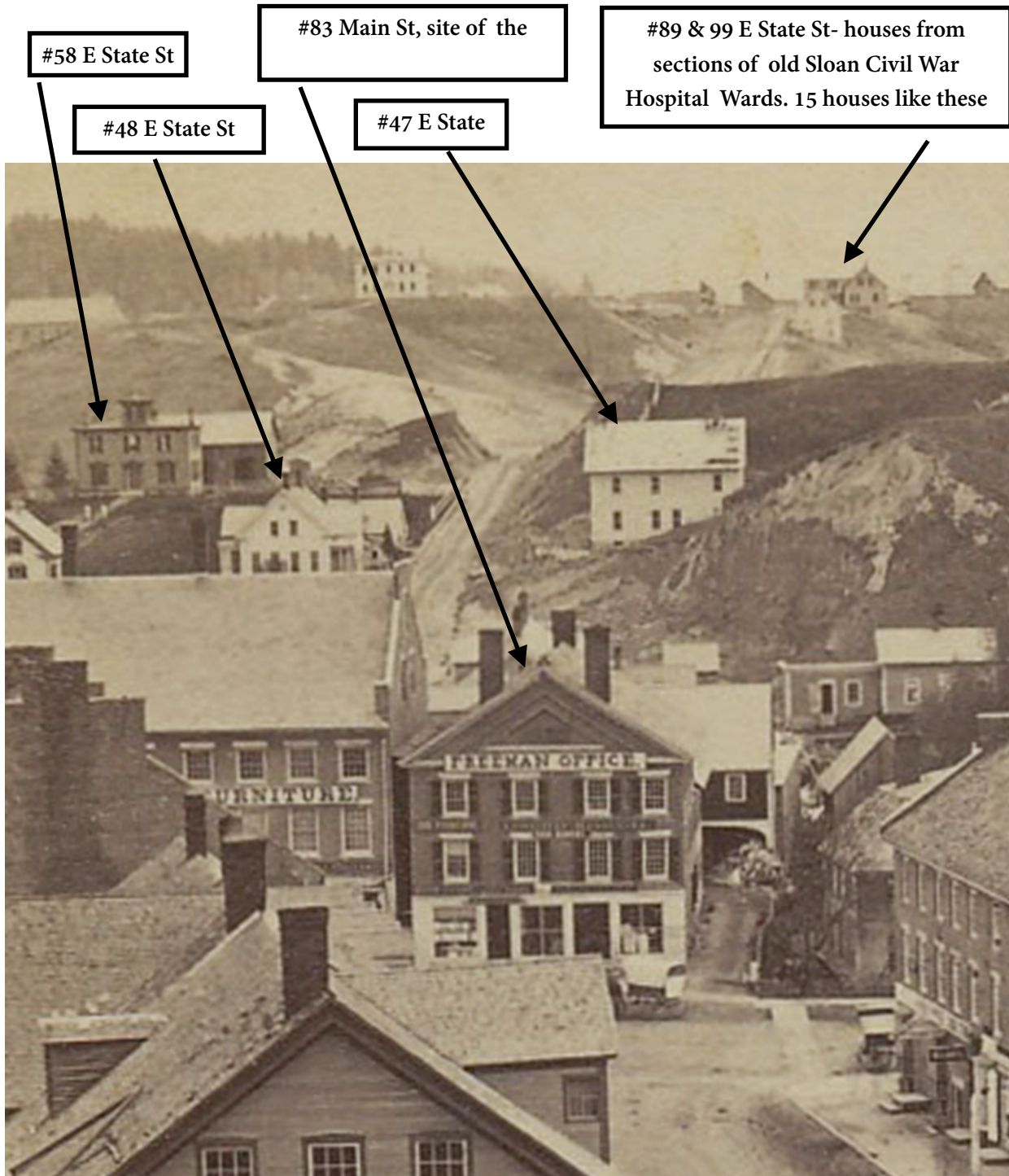


Figure 3. Downtown Montpelier in 1874 looking towards College Hill.

E State St did not exist until the 1860s. One reason as you can see in the picture above is that the area was a wild clay wilderness of sorts. The clay soil was unstable, with small land slides and steep terrain. Figure 3A on right shows the problem no one had tackled yet. You can see the unstable bank even now behind the police station. The marked houses in Figure 3 are ones that exist today on E State St. I include current photos of them on the last few pages.

The 1880 shows Eliza living at #21 E. State St with the George W Bolton family. George was a “composer” or typesetter at the VT Watchman & State Journal on Main St. I think she must have been working on renovating a house at that point. But I’m interested that she must have been friends with George.

In 1883 Eliza adjusted her life to accommodate having Arminda with her. She sold her #48 E State St house and built another one on an adjoining lot. The environment that Arminda needed was unique. Templeton describes Arminda thus: “The patient was violent a large part of the time, expending her fury upon the bedding and clothing. She would tear to pieces and tie in knots every rag she could get hold of, until finally Miss Guernsey had to make her a dress of heavy duck.....Yet this odd woman persisted in keeping her insane sister with her.” Eliza decided to make her own insane asylum for her sister. The new house was made of 2 connected octagonal houses plus other additions. She had an interior cage constructed, and also a fenced outdoor area to give her access to fresh air. In a remarkable stroke of luck the wonderful and accurate 1884 Poole and Norris birds eye view map of Montpelier shows roughly how this looked. I’ve zoomed in on E State St. and Mr Poole seems to have gone to great lengths to capture this odd jumble of abodes.



Figure 3A. 1853 Map showing the corner of Main, State, E State upper left. Wilderness is in the center.

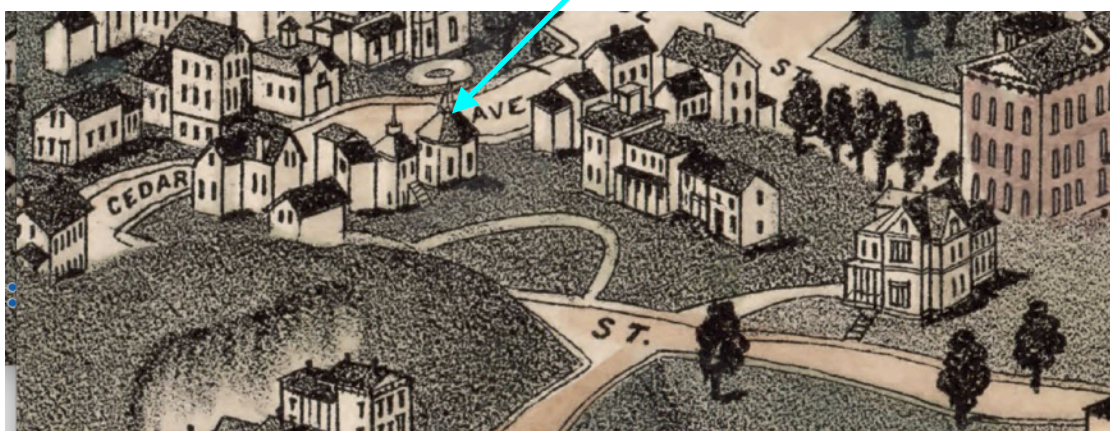


Figure 4. From 1884 Norris & Poole Map - #48 that Eliza sold is to right of CEDAR. New octagons are on right of #48.

In 1886 Eliza took Arminda, now blind, to visit her daughter Emma in Burlington for a few weeks. In November 1889, the year Templeton wrote the article, Arminda passed away at age 72 of “Nervous Prostration” defined by a medical glossary of old time diseases as “Extreme exhaustion from inability to control physical and mental activities.” She had outlived her ex husband Joel by 12 years.

Her duties done, Eliza set out on one last building project at age 70. She planned to conquer a part of the small wilderness in her neighborhood across the street. Starting in June, she sold her double octagon house, retaining one of the octagons for her own use. Templeton reports:

“She purchased of George W. Wilder a lot on the opposite side of East State street, near the summit of a high hill overlooking the entire village. Instead of using her remaining funds in building a cottage of such proportions as would meet her needs, she hired men to move the octagon to the lot. It was moved out on East State Street and up the hill a few rods, where it remained for three weeks in the middle of the highway, bolstered up by blocks.”

Templeton said she had her cooking stove moved outside to cook meals during this time, sometimes in the rain, and gave a stamp of approval with the following caveat - “.. if the clay bank upon which the house is built does not slide out next spring she will be all right.”

The current #55 E State St (Figure 5) must have been her new home, or part of it anyway. I’m not sure where the octagon was, and according to the current owner there is an irregularity in wall facing west towards town. One theory is that the middle of the current house with the bay window was the original house with the octagon somewhere, later removed when additions were made to either side by a later owner.

When Eliza moved in she was 71 years old. Templeton described her appearance at that time: “Miss Guernsey is one of the oddest of figures on the street. She dresses showily, her exterior having the appearance of shabby gentility to an extreme degree. But if the texture of her dress be of silk, it matters little to her how patched or how ragged it may be. She affects a style of dress in vogue during the forties - white crape shawl, a relic of past glory; black silk dress bearing marks of antiquity; bonnet elaborately trimmed with flowers and parti-colored ostrich plumes, mementoes of her millinery days; shoes minus most of the buttons, and white stockings, no matter what the weather.”



Figure 5. #55 E State St - Eliza’s last home

The end of an era

By 1890 Eliza was renting out rooms to tenants. Templeton speaks of her focus on taking in fragile old folks at the end of life, and then attending many funerals. But her health must have been failing, and she sold her house to move in with her niece and adopted daughter Emma Amanda in Burlington. In 1895 she “suffered a paralytic shock”, meaning a stroke, and moved in with James and Elvira Young at #34 St Paul St (Figure 16) for care. She passed away May 14th. There is a grave stone commemorating her as well as her sisters Arminda, Pheobe, and Lucy in the Green Mount Cemetery. I plan to visit them often.

The people who bought her property and others would improve and level the clay banks to make development of East State St easier to accomplish. New buildings would soon fill the gaps along the street, such as #54 (Figure 8), built in 1890. I think the massive retaining wall long the south side of the street along the #55 property was a big improvement in creating a functioning street.

I am so fond of Eliza. She was one of a kind, talented, and resourceful in a time when most women were dependent on marriage for survival. She followed her own path while caring for her loved ones and others in the community generously. And my heart goes out to Arminda, who fate crushed so harshly.

I do have a question -

Who was Templeton?

That person clearly knew Eliza well, and empathized with her along with rendering wry judgement. That person had been inside the octagons. Several Templetons lived in Montpelier near Eliza’s neighborhood according to the 1889 Child’s Directory. Loomis Street was the home of 2 brothers, both physicians who had been surgeons in the Civil War, then settled in Montpelier. Their father James, also a physician lived in East Montpelier Center.

Dr James Templeton lived at 20 Loomis Street (Figure 13) with his wife Adeline and some boarders, including Charles Templeton, listed as a medical student. Dr Hiram Templeton lived at 37 Loomis Street (Figure 14) in 1889 with his wife Lydia and grown daughter Clara. Could it be that “Templeton” was friends with Eliza, heard her daily concerns and complaints, and catalogued them, then later producing the profile in the paper towards the end of her life? There were 2 other Templetons farming on “Clay Hill”, but I think whoever her friend was they were in her neighborhood. Possibly she was friends with one of the doctors, or one of the wives. But my guess is that it was Clara “Carrie” Templeton, Hiram Templeton’s daughter. Born in 1855, she was single and living in her parents’ house in 1889 at age 34. She only got married to George A Newton, a candy maker at the Cross Baking company in 1893, when Eliza was quite old. The Newtons moved to Main Street. I imagine that Carrie lived comfortably growing up, and in 1891 she put an ad in the paper selling “Blush of Roses” (Figure 5A right) so maybe she was friends with Eliza who had an interest in fashion.

Whoever “Templeton” was I like to imagine them chatting on the corner of Cedar St and School St, or crossing paths on State St, maybe holding up their dress hems crossing a muddy street. I have a suspicion that Templeton was a woman, but who knows. I have looked for other “Templeton” articles in the newspaper but can only find this one.

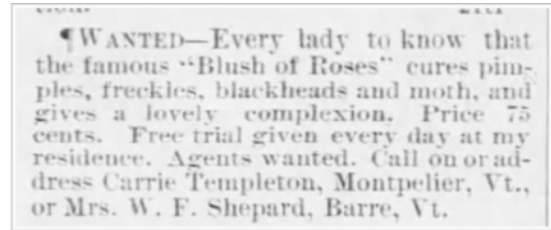


Figure 5A. 8/5/1891 Argus & Patriot

A fitting end to this story is to present an editorial (Figure 7) of Eliza's printed in the paper after she read of “Aunt Abigail” (Figure 6) in 1884. That article is first, below. I think Eliza refers to another article about a woman from Middlesex, but I can't find that one. I'm sure Eliza would be happy to speak for herself.

Read the article below this first

then Eliza's response

MISS ABIGAIL SANDERS, who was better known as “Aunt Abigail,” and lived in a little house in the vicinity of the foundry, was found dead yesterday afternoon at about five o'clock. Not having seen her since Saturday, one of the neighbors went to her house and discovered her sitting in an arm-chair in front of her stove. She had on her hood, shawl, and mittens, and held in one hand a large stick, with which she had apparently been poking the fire. The body was frozen, and a hen was roosting on one shoulder, while another lay dead at her feet. It is thought that she died on Sunday, and perhaps of some heart trouble. She had been quite as comfortable during the winter as for several years past. Miss Sanders first came to Montpelier with Judge Redfield's family. For several years she had lived a solitary life. She was about seventy years of age.

Figure 6. Vt Watchman & State Journal
1/21/1885

A Suggestion.

Mr. Editor:—In regard to the sad condition of the woman, referred to in the Middlesex item in your last paper, I would like to make a suggestion. Would it not be well to build a room about fifteen feet square, with one or two windows on the sunny side, and furnish a small stove, bed, chairs, table, etc., near her hut, and tell her she is welcome to it while she lives; and build it at once, the first warm day it could be done, and occasionally have a little provision left there. I hope it will be seen to, at once, and not have her left to starve and freeze, as Aunt Abigail was, as, I feel very sure, if her history could be known, she has passed through some severe trial, which has caused her to wish to be away from all society. She may have had some experience similar to a brother and sister that I knew, who became religious and joined the church, and lived such sincere Christian lives, as all believed who knew them, but after a while, seeing so much dishonesty practiced among the church members with each other, they became grieved, and finally disgusted, with all so-called civilized Christian society, and they left their own house by the roadside, and built another in the middle of their woodland, where they could only have the society of the birds and squirrels. And such beautiful prayers and sermons as were heard from him while he was in his field at work in his retired home were seldom heard anywhere. Again, this woman may have had something of the experience of the old lady who was being carried “over the hill to the poor-house.” Let us be human always.

ELIZA V. GUERNSEY.

Figure 7. Vt Watchman & State Journal
1/28/1885

Houses of interest still existing in Montpelier:

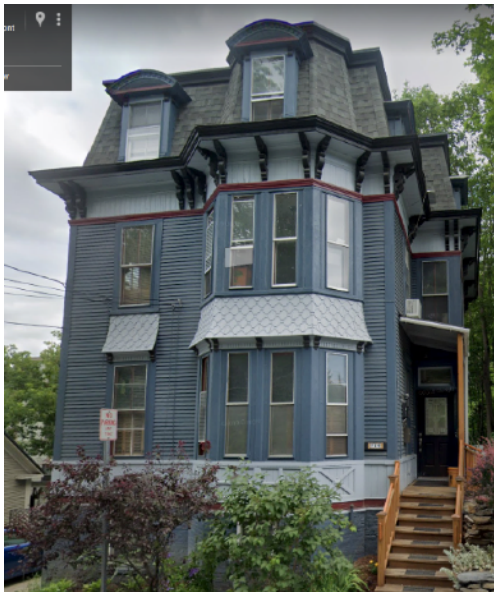


Figure 8. #54 E State St - built about 1890 next to #48



Figure 9. #58 E State St - Built before 1873 owned by Dr G.M. Brigham before 1873, sold to Mr Cross.



Figure 10. #47 E State St - Also owned by Dr. Brigham Built before 1873



Figure 11. #68 Built for his family by well known architect George H Guernsey - 1882



Figure 12. #99 E State St - Example of house
built from sections of Sloan Civil War
Hospital Wards around 1870



Figure 13. #20 Loomis St - owned by
Dr James Templeton & wife Adeline



Figure 14 #37 Loomis St
Owned by Dr Hiram Templeton
& wife Lydia, Carrie's home in 1889



Figure 15. West side of #55 E State St. The bump out might have been part of Eliza's original house.



Figure 16. #34 St Paul St owned by James J (stone mason) and Elvira Young who took Eliza in after her stroke. She died in this house.



Figure 17. Emma Amanda's house at 274 Maple St, Burlington still standing

Miscellany

Best Show Case of Millinery Miss E. Guernsey,		
The Committee recommend the following premiums which they have no authority to award.		
Best Embroidered Silk Mantilla Mrs. Charles Reed,		1 00
2d do do Miss E. Guernsey,		.75
Best Cambric Embroidery Mrs. John Clark and Miss M. J. Perry each		.75
Best Silk Embroidered Scarf Mrs. E. J. Scott,		.75
Best Velvet Mantilla Miss W. S. Stebbins,		.75
Best Flannel Embroidery Mrs. J. W. E. Bliss,		.50
Best Head Dresses Miss Guernsey and Miss Stebbins each,		.75

Vt Watchman & State Journal 10/6/1854
Awards given at Washington County Show and Fair

Millinery & Bleaching.

MISS E. V. GUERNSEY, in connection with her Millinery, will, during the ensuing season, do all kinds of STRAW WORK; bleach and press Straw and Neapolitan Bonnets; color Bonnets, black, brown or drab; also color white Feathers, restore black Lace; press all kinds of Felt Hats and Bonnets. She will also make Ladies' Bonnets of Children's Hats, Leghorn, Straw, white or colored, at only a small expense.

I have the assistance of Miss VAIL, who has great experience and skill in all kinds of Straw Work, and will do work of this kind at short notice.

Montpelier, March 28, 1863. 58-4w

Christian Repository 4/4/1863
Eliza's sewing business before moving to E State St

MISS ELIZA V. GUERNSEY has taken the agency for Montpelier and the towns adjoining for the American Diphtheria Remedy, gotten up by a celebrated physician in New Hampshire, which has never been known to fail in cases of diphtheria and other difficulties of the throat, in whatever form they may occur. Outside application only. No family should be without it. Sold only by agents.

VT Watchman & State Journal 1/28/1875

Miss S. A. E. Walton will give a reading of choice selections in Miss Eliza V. Guernsey's parlors, at Montpelier, Friday evening at 7 o'clock. Admission 10 cents.

VT Watchman & State Journal 5/19/1875

MILLINERY AND DRESS MAKING!

Miss E. V. Guernsey

Has reopened her Millinery and Dress Making Establishment, at her residence, on East State Street, where she will be happy to receive her former friends, and also others. She proposes to keep on hand Ready-made Robes, Caps, etc. Especial care will be given to Dress Making, Cloaks, etc., etc.

33-35

VT Watchman & State Journal 6/14/1876

Eliza tries to start up her sewing business at #48 E State