An Illustrious Family

BY CHARLOTTE JACKSON AND KATE LYNCH

An archives documents nine generations of activism in a historic family home.

Colorized postcard depicting Bowne House. From original print by Artist Jacques Gerard Milbert; Lithographer Charles Etienne Mott, 1825.

Built in 1661 by John Bowne, an English settler in present-day Flushing, Queens, the Bowne House is regarded as a national shrine to religious freedom. Bowne was a Quaker convert celebrated for his successful defense of religious tolerance in the face of imprisonment and exile by the authorities of New Netherland, an ordeal documented in his journal and correspondence.

The family preserved the possessions and papers of the home's residents over nine generations of continuous occupancy, while furthering Bowne's commitment to personal liberty through their own civic involvement. The resulting collections form a microcosm of New York History from the Dutch colonial period to the post-WWII era.

The colonial-era "Bowne Family Papers of Flushing, Long Island" contains land deeds and other official records dating back to 1653; the personal and religious correspondence of John Bowne, his wife and descendants; and Quaker records reflecting the family's role as faith leaders. The archives also preserves facsimiles and transcriptions of John Bowne's journal and account book, documenting his farming and trading activities.

The seventeenth century letters in the Bowne House Archives relate to the missions of John Bowne and his wife Hannah [Feake] Bowne as Quakers in Flushing and abroad. Hannah's stepfather William Hallett was the schout (sheriff) of Flushing until he was removed from office in late 1656 by the New Netherland Council for allowing unlawful Baptist meetings in their home. In 1657, the first English Quakers landed in New Amsterdam and began converting many residents of the English towns. Arrests of locals who hosted English Quakers resulted in the Flushing Remonstrance, a landmark document demanding religious tolerance, whose signers included Bowne's in-laws.

In 1661, John and Hannah attended the Yearly Meeting in Rhode Island, where they may have encountered the first female Quaker preacher, Elizabeth Hooten, and her travelling companion Joan Brocksopp, who like John Bowne was from Derbyshire. Brocksopp features prominently in the Bowne House Archives and her letters detail both John Bowne's 1663 exile and Hannah Bowne's two missions abroad between 1675 and 1678.

In 1662, John Bowne was arrested and banished for holding Quaker meetings in the house. George Fox, the founder of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), wrote letters supporting the couple. When Bowne traveled to Amsterdam for his tribunal in 1663, Fox wrote a letter directing Quakers in Holland to assist him. Fox later preached in Flushing and lodged at the Bowne House in 1672. In 1675, Fox provided a letter of introduction for Hannah Bowne on her overseas

Above: *Letter of introduction by George Fox for Hannah Feake Bowne's 1675 religious voyage to England*

Right: *1897 photograph showing the room where John Bowne was arrested in 1661*

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mission, likely focused on organizing Quaker Women's Meetings.

This early correspondence reflects the Quaker network John and Hannah Bowne connected to at home, in exile, and on missions in England, Ireland, Holland, Germany, and Barbados. There are no known letters from Hannah Bowne, only letters she received. She remains a compelling figure whose achievements are richly described by John Bowne in his 1678 eulogy at the Quaker Meeting on St. John's Lane, London, where she died.

The eighteenth-century papers of John and Hannah's descendants document a legacy of Quaker faith, civic leadership, horticulture, and trade. Their ranks include preachers and ministers, philanthropists, entrepreneurs, social reformers, and government officials, including New York Mayor Walter Bowne (1829-1833). Female missionaries, such as Patience Brayton and Susanna Morris, continue to figure in Quaker correspondence. Revolutionary history surfaces in a 1784 petition to the British Army, in which the New York Quakers refuse to serve in the "City Watch," a citizen patrol to deter street crime and riots that did not sit well with the pacifist Quakers.

After independence, John's great-grandson Robert ran Bowne and Co. Printers, which is still in business; sat on the board of New York's first bank (now BNY Mellon); became a founding member of the Manumission Society alongside Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr; and served as an African Free School trustee.

When Robert's brother John Bowne III died in 1804, Bowne House passed to his widow and four daughters; his daughter Mary and her husband, Quaker minister and abolitionist Samuel Parsons, later inherited the property. Mary Bowne Parsons' sisters remained unmarried, devoting themselves to the Flushing Female Association, a racially integrated school for the poor founded in 1814. The correspondence of Samuel and Mary's six children reveals ties to anti-slavery activists like Lewis Tappan and Gerrit Smith. A rare 1850 letter from Rev. Simeon Jocelyn, vice-president of the New York State Vigilance Committee, carried by a fugitive slave, instructs William Bowne Parsons to "assist this colored brother," which substantiates Bowne House's role in the Underground Railroad.

Three generations of Bowne and Parsons "bluestockings" travelled and moved in cultured circles. The "Parsons and Bowne Papers" complement their stories with photographs and prints, maps, books, and ephemera. Nearly 100 postcards memorialize the grand tour of Robert Bowne Parsons' daughters, Anna and Bertha, that included Europe, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Morocco. These sisters inherited Bowne House in 1915 and oversaw its 1945 dedication as a museum. The house, among the oldest in New York City, is one of the best-preserved examples of Anglo-Dutch vernacular residential architecture. The Bowne House Archives also encompasses preservation activities, such as architectural drawings and historic structures reports.

Bowne House Archives received a 2018 grant from the New York State Archives Documentary Heritage Program to create finding aids for these collections. While the colonial documents remain off-site for preservation, high-resolution digital surrogates are available. Visit bownehouse.org for more information. ■

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