

# The Bowne House Historical Society, Inc



*Recognized for the strength of its extensive archival holdings, Bowne House is now designated as a facility for the research of Underground Railroad history in New York.*

## **Civic Engagement and Civil Disobedience: Samuel B. and Susan (Howland) Parsons and Robert B. and Mary (Mitchell) Parsons**

By Ellen M. Spindler

*Collection Volunteer, with research assistance by  
Kate Lynch, researcher, and Charlotte Jackson,  
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The Bowne House has previously reported that at least three known Bowne House residents—Samuel Bowne Parsons (1819–1906), Robert Bowne Parsons (1821–1898), and William Bowne Parsons (1823–1856)—made documented connections with prominent activists involved in the Underground Railroad in New York and

served as agents of an interracial and interdenominational network of the Underground Railroad. Their involvement from at least 1842–50 was described in *Eight Years of Documented Bowne House Residents' Involvement in a Network of the New York Underground Railroad*, published on the Bowne House website. This article was based on primary sources in the Bowne House and other archives, as well as obituaries of Samuel B. and Robert B. attesting to a long-term commitment to the

cause. New information has since come to light that Samuel and Robert Bowne Parsons and their wives Susan (Howland) Parsons and Mary (Mitchell) Parsons may have also been involved in assisting freedom seekers in multiple escapes even after passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.<sup>ii</sup>



*(Bowne House, date unknown)  
Flushing, New York in Historical Photographs<sup>i</sup>*

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## Samuel Bowne Parsons (1819-1906)

### Parsons and Co. Commercial Garden and Nursery

The Quaker minister Samuel Parsons (1774-1841) ("Samuel"), and his two sons Samuel and Robert Bowne Parsons ("Samuel B. and Robert B."), were the founders of the Parsons and Co. Commercial Garden and Nursery circa 1838, assisted by their brother William B. Parsons. The Village of Flushing had been incorporated the previous year on April 15, 1837; Waller's *History of the Town of Flushing*<sup>iii</sup> makes no mention of the Nursery in his description of the village at that time. Samuel's diary circa 1838 makes mention of buying trees and shrubs to provide his sons with an occupation, and Samuel B.'s 1880 memoir describes how he began the Nursery with his brother Robert B. approximately 40 years earlier. Robert B. may have started there after he graduated from Haverford College in 1839.

The Nursery was largely operated adjacent to the Bowne House on Bowne Farm land south of Broadway (now Northern Boulevard) and north of Sandford Avenue. A map circa 1841 also shows a parcel in Samuel's name west of what is now Parsons Boulevard and north of Broadway, where Samuel and his wife Mary (Bowne) Parsons (1784-1839) resided and which Samuel B. later inherited. There is also another entirely wooded lot west of Whitestone Avenue. Interestingly, Mary's father John Bowne IV (1742-1804) had also left Mary and her sisters a "young orchard" south of the Bowne House and behind the barn in his 1804 will, together with the Bowne House and Farm (also to his wife Ann during her lifetime).

After Mary (Bowne) Parson's death in 1839, Samuel and his unmarried children, including Samuel B. and Robert B., vacated their residence on Broadway across from the Bowne House and moved back into the Bowne House. Between 1825 and 1840, the Bowne House roof had been raised, creating extra living space on the second floor. This renovation



*Samuel B. Parsons*

may have occurred so the Parsons could be accommodated together with Mary's sisters Eliza and Anna, who still resided there. Samuel B. and Susan Howland were married on November 5, 1842 at the Friends Meeting House in her native New Bedford, Massachusetts. Afterward, the couple moved back into Samuel B.'s parents' former residence on Broadway.

As of 1852, the Nursery comprised 75 acres adjacent to the Bowne House, with over half of Samuel B. Parson's personal 45-acre lot also dedicated to plantings. The Bowne Farm to the south and east occupied 150 acres, while the marshland still appears undeveloped.<sup>iv</sup> Although the Nursery was quite successful, Samuel B. reportedly also used it as a cover for his documented involvement in the Underground Railroad.<sup>v</sup>

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## Samuel B. Parsons' Civic Engagement

In 1842, the same year as Samuel B.'s marriage, the New York State Legislature created a Board of Education charged with operating public schools, with control given to local boards.<sup>vi</sup> Prior to this, the Free School Movement in New York State had been commenced by philanthropic organizations such as the Free School Society organized in 1805, operating the first free schools in the state for boys.<sup>vii</sup> This was later named the Public School Society and merged with the Board of Education in 1853. John Murray, Jr., husband of Catherine (Bowne) Murray (Samuel B.'s first cousin, twice-removed), helped to form the Free School Society, along with other members of the New York Manumission Society. Earlier in 1787, members of the New York Manumission Society, including the same John Murray, Jr. and Samuel B.'s great-uncle Robert Bowne, had founded the African Free School in Manhattan as a philanthropic school for black students.

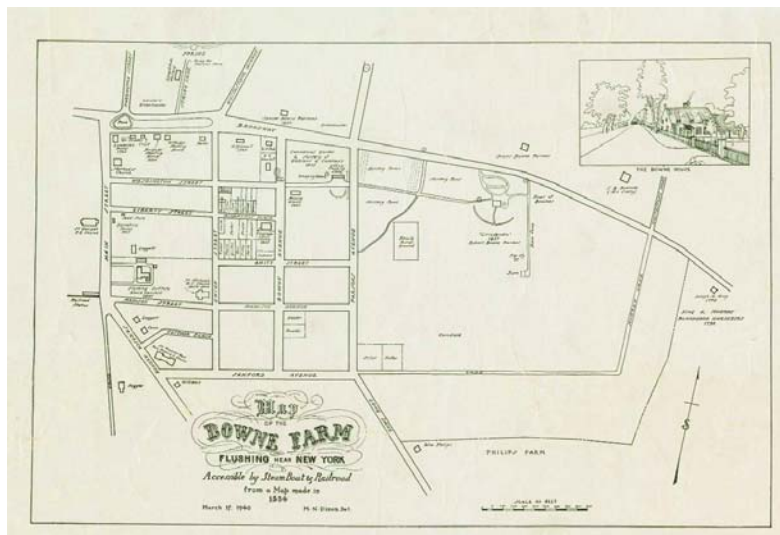
Samuel B. served on the local Board of Trustees of the school ward that included Flushing. This Board had previously opened the first free public school in New York State in 1843.<sup>viii</sup> One obituary refers to Samuel B.'s involvement as of 1851; another source mentions his presence there as of 1848; yet another reports a twenty-five-year involvement with the school system, as well as his advocacy for free libraries.

The first free private school in Queens was actually commenced decades earlier in 1814 by the Flushing Female Association, initially composed of thirteen local women, including

Samuel and Robert B.'s aunts Ann and Catherine Bowne. Over time the Association began to interact with the public school system and received public funds, as it provided free education to a mixed racial group of students. Those funds were reportedly withdrawn in 1844, however, with the money instead devoted to the school directly under the care of the Trustees.<sup>ix</sup> One can only guess that Samuel B. fought to regain the Association's funding once he served on the Board. Public funds were contributed again in the 1860's once the Board of Education rented the school building, and the Association continued to provide free education solely to blacks during the time the public school system remained segregated.

Samuel B. also served on Haverford College's Board of Managers, a Quaker school that his son Samuel Jr. later attended for a few years.<sup>x</sup> Samuel B. had been the tenth of the first 21 students to enter Haverford School (later known as Haverford College) in 1833. His father Samuel was one of Haverford College's founders and served on Haverford's initial Board of Managers from his election in December, 1830 until his death in 1841.<sup>xi</sup> Samuel B. is referenced in a note on the back of the 1848 Haverford Board of Managers meeting minutes as a non-resident manager living in New York, a time when the school had temporarily closed due to financial troubles, but then re-opened to admit non-Quakers after receiving donations from Samuel B.'s father-in-law George Howland, Sr. and from alumni.<sup>xii</sup>

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*Reproduction of 1854 map of Bowne Farm, Queens Library digital archives.*



*Haverford College Founders Hall,  
completed in 1833*

Not surprisingly, Samuel B. was also involved with horticultural societies and was a charter member of the American Pomological Society formed in 1848, an organization devoted to the science and production of fruit and variety development. The Parsons Nursery itself was an important source of rare trees and plants provided to Central and Prospect Parks. In 1846 Samuel B. also started a plantation in Florida, where he cultivated and introduced for the first time in America the navel or seedless orange. He wrote noted horticultural books as well, such as "Parsons on the Rose: A Treatise on the Propagation, Culture, and History of the Rose" initially printed in 1847, and authored an essay on "Woman in Horticulture" which he read before the New York Horticulture Society in 1880.

Samuel B. was also on the Board of Directors of a railroad constructed between Hunter's Point (now Long Island City) and Flushing starting in 1854 at the outer edge of the village. It was at first intended to run the railroad to Williamsburg, but this route was abandoned. At the time of Flushing's incorporation in 1837, stages ran to Brooklyn and presumably they continued to do so at this time. Samuel B. additionally served as President of the Flushing Bank for ten years and is shown as President in an 1890 Banking report (a relative named Walter Bowne served as Co-Vice-President with him at the time).

The 1850 Federal census shows Samuel B. living with his wife Susan (Howland) Parsons, three children (Susan, Samuel, Jr., and George), and four servants. After the death of his wife in 1854, Samuel married Clara Elizabeth Weyman on June 2, 1858 in Brooklyn and also had a child with her. Presumably Clara shared Samuel B.'s interests and sympathies, but less is known about her at this time. The 1860 Federal census shows Samuel B. living with her, three children and a merchant named Allen with his wife and child (possible in-laws related to his first wife), and three servants. He is described as having \$100,000 in real estate and \$150,000 in personal assets.

In the 1860's, Samuel B. purchased land for another nursery called Kissena Nurseries south of the Bowne House where Kissena Park and Lake is now located (part of the New York City Parks Department). The land was initially used as a mill pond and then for ice cutting. This Nursery began circa 1872 when Samuel B. and Robert B.'s partnership dissolved and they each began separate businesses.<sup>xiv</sup>

Both Samuel B. and Robert B. registered for the draft in Civil War records from 1863 to 1865, although they were in their early 40's at that time. There are no records, however, indicating they actually served.

### **Samuel B. Parsons' Civil Disobedience**

Samuel B. was also reportedly an intimate acquaintance of Horace Greeley, the editor of the New York Tribune who was a leader in the movement opposed to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. Both Horace Greeley and the abolitionist newspaperman William Lloyd Garrison appeared at an anniversary celebration of the West Indian Emancipation at a Flushing picnic ground sponsored by the New York Anti-Slavery Society in August, 1853.<sup>xvi</sup>

On August 1, 1862, another Emancipation anniversary took place in Flushing attended by some five hundred persons "in a beautiful grove, tendered for the purpose by the Messrs. PARSONS."<sup>xvii</sup> There were large delegations from

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...*Samuel B. Parson's Civil Disobedience* from page 4

New York and Brooklyn reported in attendance, including the elite of the African-American community, and thanks were given to those who made the arrangements, "particularly the proprietors of the beautiful grove in which they were permitted to meet." The orator was Rev. Henry Highland (H.H.) Garnett, a well-known African-American orator, activist, and Presbyterian minister educated at the African Free School.

Samuel B. was similarly close to the anti-slavery minister Henry Ward Beecher of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn and is said by one source to have acted "in collusion" with him in the use the Nursery as a cover for his Underground Railroad activity.

### Susan (Howland) Parsons (1824-54)



*Susan R. Howland Parsons and children*

Susan (Howland) Parsons is described by one source as an active participant in the Underground Railroad with her husband Samuel Bowne Parsons, following her own family tradition of abolitionist sympathizers.<sup>xix</sup> As previously reported, she was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts to George and Susanna Howland. Her father George, Sr. was a wealthy merchant involved in the whaling industry and banking, yet he pursued philanthropic interests. Susan's mother was a prominent female Quaker minister.

Flushing ever received such a splendid heritage.

In public life Mr. Parsons was quite as active as in his private business. In politics he was first a Whig, voted for the elder Harrison in 1840 for President, and after the Republican party was organized espoused its principles strongly. He was a staunch Abolitionist and during the exciting days just before and during the War of the Rebellion, devoted much time in assisting slaves to escape. It was his boast that he assisted more slaves to freedom than any other man in Queens county. It was one of his pleasures in later years to relate how in the dead of night he would take those black fugitives from places of concealment in his cellar or stable, drive them to Whitestone where he would engage a boatman to row them across to the other shore, from where escape was comparatively easy.

In 1851 or thereabouts Mr. Parsons was President of the Board of Trustees which established in Flushing the

*Excerpt of one of Samuel Bowne Parsons' obituaries<sup>vv</sup>*

New Bedford was a well-known Underground Railroad destination and a "community of tolerance" where many freedom-seekers settled permanently. George employed the young Frederick Douglass, who wrote of him in his autobiography; his former home was included in the New Bedford Historical Society's proposed "Abolition Row" historic district.<sup>xx</sup> Thus, New Bedford might have been one possible destination for the freedom seekers whom Samuel B. and Susan assisted in their escapes.

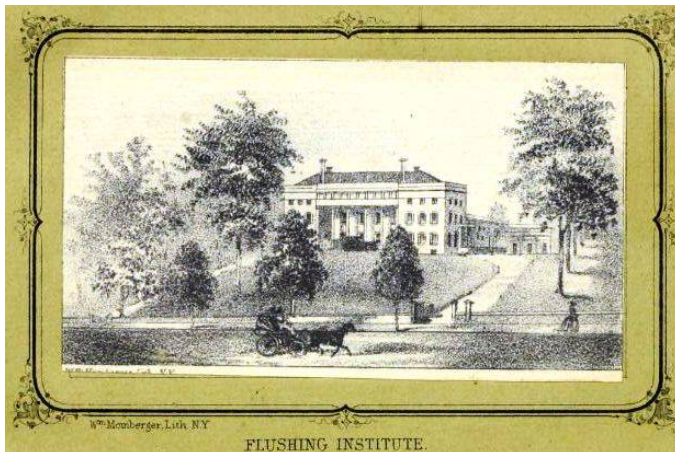
Susan was also a distant cousin of another Quaker, Emily Howland (1827-1929), whose parents Slocum Howland and Hannah (Tallcott) Howland operated a stop on the Underground Railroad at their store and other facilities in Cayuga County in upstate New York. Some of the escapes they assisted in, including ones

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...Susan Howland Parsons continued from page 5

originating with agents in Maryland and Pennsylvania, were documented in Emily's diary.<sup>xxi</sup> We know Susan's father and brother were in close contact with Slocum Howland as her brother Robert Bowne Howland<sup>xxii</sup> later purchased a home from Slocum in Cayuga County and turned it into a ladies' school called the Howland School which was operated from 1863 until 1880 in part with funds donated by his father. This is another interesting connection and potential destination of freedom seekers assisted by Samuel B. and Susan (Howland) Parsons for the Bowne House to explore.

Susan (Howland) Parsons also reportedly worked with her husband Samuel B. in the Queens Free School movement. We are looking into whether she continued her mother-in-law Mary (Bowne) Parson's reported involvement in founding the Flushing Institute's first school for young women, St. Ann's Hall which taught its students to read and write.<sup>xxiii</sup> The Flushing Institute was incorporated in 1827 and operated initially for ten years as a school for boys. It then operated as a school for young women under the name of St. Ann's Hall after moving near College Point circa 1838. Mary (Bowne) Parsons was in failing health at that point and died in St. Croix in early 1839. It would not be surprising if Susan were also involved in Samuel's library work as her half-brother George, Jr. is known to have donated money from his trust to a free library fund in New Bedford.



*Flushing Institute*<sup>xxiv</sup>

In her short life, Susan was thus able to make her own likely civic contribution, as well as participate with Samuel B. in his Underground Railroad activity and civil disobedience to the Fugitive Slave Act. The children she had with Samuel B. included Samuel Parsons, Jr., the notable landscape architect for the New York City Parks Department.

**Robert Bowne Parsons (1821-1898)**



*Robert B. Parsons,*  
**Bowne House Portrait collection**

Robert Bowne Parsons' involvement in the Underground Railroad as a fundraiser and agent has also been previously documented. Less is known about his activities post-1849, but new information has now come to light about his involvement in forming a new First Congregational church across the street from the Bowne House. There is also information about his wife Mary (Mitchell) Parsons' possible involvement in assisting him with escapes of

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multiple freedom seekers after their marriage in 1857.<sup>xxv</sup>

### Robert B. Parsons' Civic Engagement

Robert B. is described in his 1898 obituary as having always been interested in the prosperity of the Village of Flushing. He served at one time as one of its trustees. He was a member of the Reform Club and 'was greatly involved in all forms of political reformation.' He is also described as a man of earnest religious character.

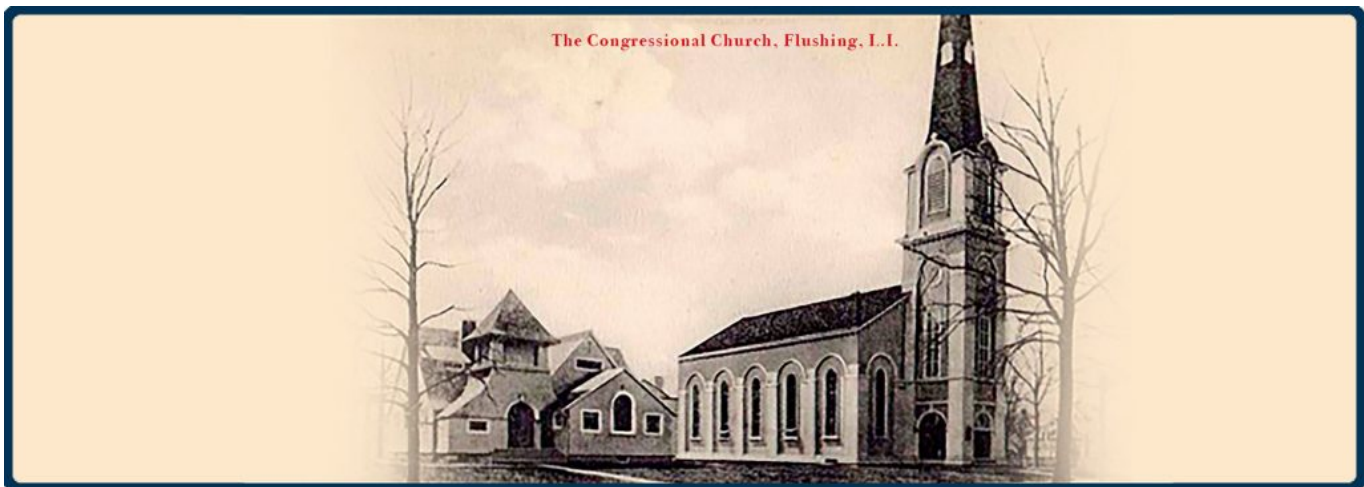
In 1851, Robert B. left his Quaker background and helped to raise funds for and organize a new church called the First Congregational Church located on the corner almost directly across the street from the Bowne House with the backing of Henry Ward Beecher, the anti-slavery preacher at Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn. Plymouth Church was founded in 1847, was a known Underground Railroad depot, and is now a listed National Park Service Network to Freedom site.<sup>xxvi</sup> As previously reported, Robert B.'s efforts to fund a new Congregational church in Flushing received a personal letter of endorsement from Beecher, quoted in an unpublished history of the church: "I heartily wish that the bearer, Robert Parsons of Flushing, may find favor in the sight of all to whom these may come. He is too modest to be a good

beggar, but he is a capital man and the enterprise which he (though born a Friend) with other gentlemen is endeavoring to achieve is worthy of liberal consideration and aid."<sup>xxvii</sup>

Beecher attended the July 1, 1851 meeting of the Council that convened to organize the First Congregational Church and gave the address to the meeting after the sermon.<sup>xxviii</sup> In 1862 he also reportedly gave a well-received anti-slavery lecture entitled "*The Results of the Past and our Policy Towards The Future*" before a large audience there.<sup>xxix</sup> Rev. Dr. R.S. Storrs, a Brooklyn anti-slavery minister almost as famous as Rev. Beecher, expressed the fellowship of the churches in the initial 1851 organizational meeting. The sermon was given by Dr. Cheever, likely George B. Cheever, a noted abolitionist and first pastor of the Congregational Church of the Puritans in New York City at Union Square.<sup>xxx</sup> The presence of these three prominent and outspoken anti-slavery pastors at the organizational meeting confirms the new Congregational Church's opposition to slavery and focus on civil disobedience and resistance to the recently passed Fugitive Slave Act.

Rev. R.S. Storrs was the founding pastor in 1846 of the Congregational Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn Heights and served until just before his

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*The First Congregational Church, Flushing*

death in 1900. Like Beecher, Storrs was an active abolitionist and gave an eloquent sermon entitled "*The Obligation of Man To Obey The Civil Law: Its Ground, And Its Extent*" on December 12, 1850 at his church just a few months after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act on September 18, 1850. In his discourse, he counseled that no one had an obligation to obey an unjust law which conflicts with God's law and that, in such a case, each man's conscience must decide.<sup>xxxix</sup> He further argued in effect that all were morally obligated to disobey The Fugitive Slave Act and to actively resist according to their own conscience because slavery had been commenced initially by theft, had broken up families and deprived liberty given as a natural right by God, and no man could be another's property. The sermon was so influential that it was reprinted in book form.

The Plymouth Congregational Church on Orange Street in Brooklyn where Beecher served as pastor was initially formed by members who left the Church of the Pilgrims thinking it was too conservative; much later, however, the Church of the Pilgrims merged with Plymouth Church.<sup>xxxix</sup> It has been claimed that the participation of Brooklyn Heights and downtown Brooklyn in the abolitionist movement was so total that word got around to fugitive slaves that they could knock on the door of any church there and receive help.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The First Congregational Church in Flushing was initially organized with eighteen (or one source states twenty-five) members and was dedicated in January, 1852; its first minister was the Rev. Charles O. Reynolds. Robert B. served as a deacon. A new church was built in 1856 and the old building was moved to the back and used as a Sunday school. At the time the church was organized, the Village of Flushing had approximately 2,000-3,000 residents similar to the population when it was incorporated in April 15, 1837. It was reported at the time of incorporation to have approximately 140 dwellings, several of them magnificent. There



*First Congregational Church,  
2d edifice, built 1856,  
Bowne Avenue & Lincoln Avenue,  
Queens Library digital archives*

were two Quaker Meetings, among a few other denominations in the village, but 1851 was the first time a Congregational Church was organized there.

The First Congregational Church in Flushing came into being as a result of a merger with some members of another church—the Protestant Reformed Dutch Church of Flushing organized on May 20, 1842. Construction of this church began in 1843 at the corner of Prince and Washington Streets overlooking the Flushing Creek in what was then the finest residential district of Flushing, which included Bowne and Parsons residences. In 1851, a number of persons withdrew their membership from the Reformed Church and joined with others in forming the First Congregational Church of Flushing. As mentioned, this Church was located

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almost directly across the street from the Bowne House near the corner of Liberty Street/ Ailanthus Place (now known as 38<sup>th</sup> Avenue) as depicted on the previously shown 1854 Bowne Farm map, where the high-rise "Flushing House" retirement complex is currently located.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

By the 1870's, the membership of the remaining Dutch Reformed Church had reached 300 and another new building was planned. In 1873, a large undeveloped parcel was acquired from Mary B. Parsons, Mary (Bowne) Parson's unmarried daughter, who at that time owned the Bowne House.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The congregation began construction on a new building at 143-11 Roosevelt Avenue (formerly known as Amity) completed in 1892. This church is now known under the name "Bowne Street Community Church."

In 1974, one hundred and twenty-three years after they split, the two congregations of the Reformed Church and the First Congregational Church merged back together because of the changing character of Flushing and declining membership of each and formed the Bowne

Street Community Church—associated with both the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church in America.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Shortly after the two congregations had started meeting together but before the final incorporation of the Bowne Street Community Church, the Congregational Church was destroyed by fire (December 1970).

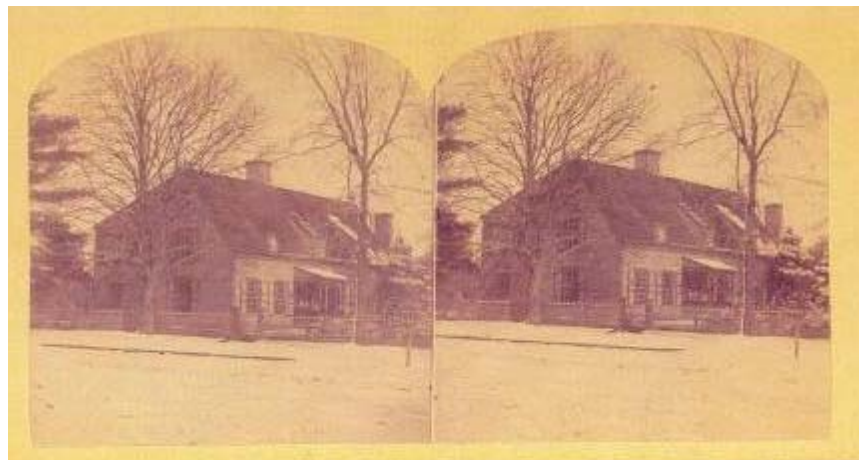
Robert B. and Mary (Mitchell) Parsons were reported in the New York Evening Post as married at Grace Episcopal Church, on August 18, 1857. Mary's obituary describes the wedding venue as Grace Church in Manhattan where the presiding minister reported in their marriage notice oversaw the most fashionable church of the time.

After Robert B.'s marriage, his family appeared in the 1860 Federal census; he is described as a horticulturist living with his wife Mary M. Parsons, daughter Anna, and three Irish servants. The value of Robert B.'s real estate by 1860 was estimated at the considerable sum of \$100,000 and personal assets at \$15,000. The 1880 census showed Robert B. as a Nurseryman living with Mary M. and five children. The 1879 City Directory showed an office for "*Robert B. Parsons & Co. Nurseries, Trees & Plants, Flushing, L.I.*" at 92 B'wy, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor. In 1882, the City Directory

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*Bowne Street  
Community Church,  
New York City Landmark*



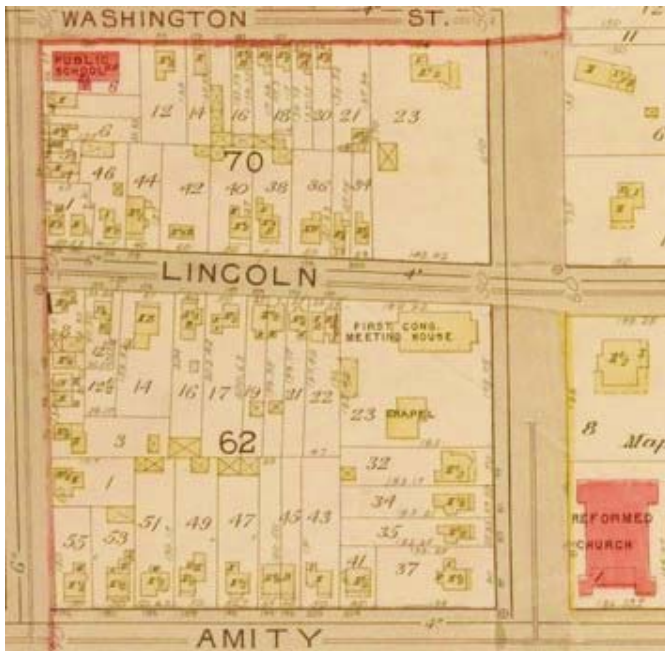
*Stereoscopic view of Bowne House, 1860, across the street  
from the First Congregational Church  
Flushing, New York in Historical Photographs<sup>xxxv</sup>*

showed Robert B. with an occupation of "trees" at an office at 41 Wall Street, with his home listed simply as "on Long Island."

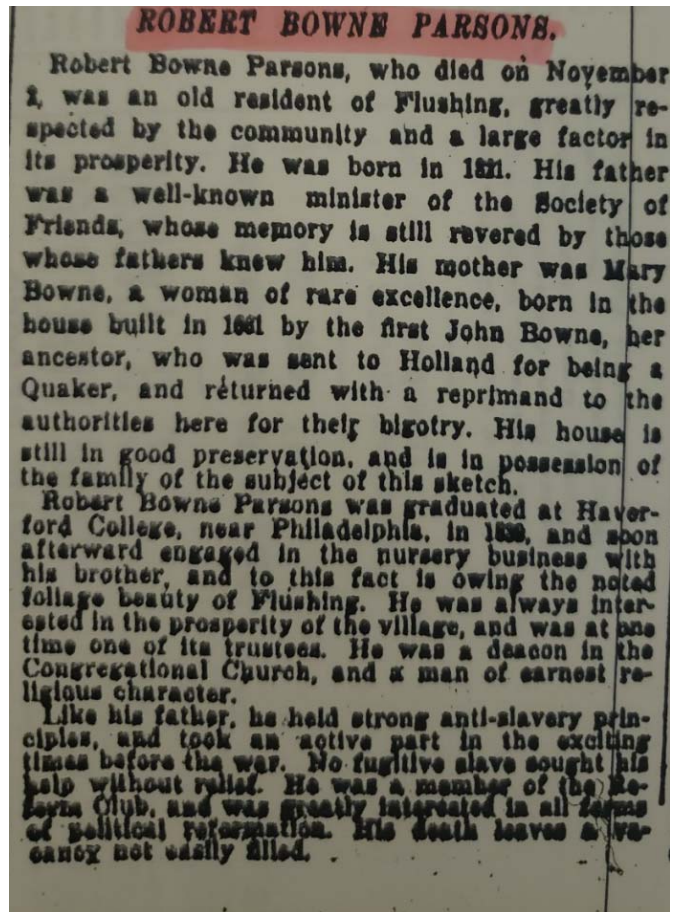
We know from correspondence in the Bowne House Archives and other repositories that Robert B. made numerous trips to England as early as 1844 when he observed a debate in Parliament, raising the possibility that he could have also conducted fund raising for various causes there. Robert B. is shown on a manifest as arriving as a passenger from England in 1868, although he apparently was not required to obtain a passport until 1888. As previously noted, he also registered for the draft during the Civil War.

### Robert B. Parsons' Civil Disobedience

Given Beecher's backing and Robert B.'s involvement, it would not be surprising if the First Congregational Church across from the Bowne House served as a stop for Robert B. to use as a depot on the Underground Railroad. We have



*1908-1913 map detail showing First Congregational Church near Bowne House and Reformed Church (now Bowne Street Community Church) Queens, Vol. 3, Double Page Plate No. 7, Part of Ward Three Flushing...*



*Robert Bowne Parsons' obituary<sup>xli</sup>*

previously reported on Robert B.'s involvement with Charles B. Ray and other officers of the New York Vigilance Committee in raising and safeguarding funds for the group and his documented meeting with Gerrit Smith, an Underground Railroad conductor at an NPS Network to Freedom listed site in upstate New York. One source describes Robert B. and his wife Mary (Mitchell) Parsons as using the Bronx ferry to transport fugitives to safekeeping and stated that they also had them rowed across Rodman's Neck to escape bounty hunters.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Rodman's Neck (formerly Anne's Hoeck or Ann Hook's Neck after Anne Hutchinson) is a peninsula of land in the Bronx that juts out into the Long Island Sound. It is south of the causeway to present day City Island and has three meadows, one a natural salt water meadow. It was named after Samuel Rodman

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who operated a ferry from Rodman's Neck to Minnefors Island (now City Island). Rodman passed away in 1780 and it is not known who took over his ferry service.). Other Bronx ferries are known to have operated between Whitestone and Westchester from properties owned by notable families such as Ferris, Hunt, di Zerega, and Lorillard.<sup>xxxix</sup> Other sources have described a different possible escape route from Long Island via skiff, sailboat or canoe across the Sound to a Quaker network of Underground Railroad stations comprising the Joseph Carpenter Home in New Rochelle, then to the Joseph Pierce home in Pleasantville, then to the David Irish home in Quaker Hill (now Pawling).<sup>xl</sup>

### Mary (Mitchell) Parsons (1829-1915)

Mary (Mitchell) Parsons was the daughter of Judge John Mitchell and Caroline Green, who moved to New York in 1835 from Charleston, South Carolina, when Mary was still a young child. As mentioned, in 1857 she married Robert Bowne Parsons, one of Flushing's prominent nurserymen. A wedding dress of white brocade silk satin and flat white satin shoes in the Bowne House's collection accession records are described as likely belonging to her. The records also describe a blue-purple silk taffeta dress, either a trousseau dress or a mourning dress, associated with Mary.

Mary (Mitchell) has been described by one source as actively assisting her husband Robert B. in his Underground Railroad activity. As we previously reported, in 1886 before Robert's death, the Bowne House went to auction, but ultimately stayed in the family through Mary's intervention. Her 1915 will requested that the Bowne House not be sold.

Mary (Mitchell) Parsons' obituary states that, during the Civil War, she and other prominent women organized a nurses' corps and provided assistance at Willetts Point to soldiers injured in battle. She is also described as one of the founders of the Children's Home at Mineola and the Flushing Historical Society, serving as active members of both. She is also reported as having done much for a Work House at Barnum's Island. She was additionally a member of the Good Citizen League, as were her daughters Anna and Bertha, and was described as an ardent church worker.

In 1910, after Robert B.'s death in 1898, the Federal census shows Mary (Mitchell) Parsons as a widow living at 371 Broadway with her five surviving children. The photo below shows the "Parsons homestead" she shared with Robert B. during her marriage, although it is from 1924 after both were deceased. The map below shows a large approximately 17-acre estate and dwelling ("Liriodendra") in Mary (Mitchell)'s

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*Mary (Mitchell) Parsons' likely wedding dress, Bowne House collection*

*...Marty Mitchell Parsons from page 11*

name on a portion of the former Nursery facing onto Broadway between Percy and Flushing Place near Lincoln Street, in the vicinity of what is now 148<sup>th</sup> Street as described on the back of the photograph.

The lives and courageous actions of Samuel and Robert Bowne Parsons and their wives Susan (Howland) and Mary (Mitchell) Parsons demonstrate how they were able to balance their civic commitments and engagement

for the good of the Village of Flushing and of society at large with the civil disobedience that their consciences and moral duty demanded in actively resisting the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. Their brave efforts in assisting the escapes of multiple freedom seekers show they were on the right side of history when confronted with the horrors of slavery—the overwhelming moral, religious, and political challenge of their day.



*RB Parsons house residence,  
Broadway Lincoln to 148th Street,  
Queen Library digital archives*

*1908-1913 map, Queen. Vol. 3,  
Double Page Plate No. 7,  
Part of Ward Three Flushing...*



- <sup>i</sup> Flushing, New York in Historical Photographs, <https://flushing-ny-memories.epizy.com/?i=2>
- <sup>ii</sup> Snodgrass, Mary Ellen, *The Underground Railroad: An Encyclopedia of People, Places, and Operations*, (New York. M.E. Sharpe 2008; Routledge 2015), pp. 400-01. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 strengthened the penalties of the previous Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, both of which permitted slave owners and bounty hunters to search for escaped slaves in free states, and made assistance to these freedom seekers even more perilous. *An Act to amend, and supplementary to, the Act entitled "An Act respecting Fugitives from Justice, and Persons escaping from the Service of their Masters", approved February twelfth, one thousand seven hundred and ninety-three, amended September 18, 1850 (FUGITIVE SLAVE ACT)*, Public Law 31-60, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 9 (1850): 462.
- <sup>iii</sup> Waller, Henry D., *History of the Town of Flushing, Long Island, New York* (Flushing. J.H. Ridenour 1899). Digitized by Hathi Trust. Waller also states that the Nursery was commenced in 1838, p. 269.
- <sup>iv</sup> R. F. O. Conner, M. Dripps, and Korff Brothers. Map of Kings and part of Queens counties, Long Island N.Y. [N. York New York: Published by M. Dripps, N.Y. New York: Engraved & printed by Korff Brothers, 1852] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2013593245/>.
- <sup>v</sup> Snodgrass, *The Underground Railroad*, pp. 400-01.
- <sup>vi</sup> McCarthy, Andy, "Class Act: Researching New York City Schools with Local History Collections" (2014), <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2014/10/20/researching-nyc-schools> (accessed September 28, 2021)
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>viii</sup> Obituary of Samuel B. Parsons, *Flushing Times* (Flushing, New York), January 5, 1906, as quoted in James Driscoll, "Flushing in the Early Nineteenth Century," in *Angels of Deliverance: The Underground Railroad in Queens, Long Island, and Beyond*, ed. Wini Warren (Flushing, New York: Queens Historical Society, 1999), 81; See also Obituary of Samuel B. Parsons, *New-York Tribune*, January 5, 1906. Library of Congress: Chronicling America - New York Tribune Archive. Article appeared on page 8 of issue consulted. See also Waller, *supra n*, at p. 194.
- <sup>ix</sup> Waller, *History of the Town of Flushing*, *supra n*, at p. 196.
- <sup>x</sup> Haverford College, one of the first Quaker schools, was founded in 1833 by members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Its initial Board of Managers was formed in December, 1830, predating the physical school and even its name, with twenty-six managers who helped to purchase the land, raise money, and establish the school and its curriculum. Managers were initially selected by the Friends Central School Association.
- <sup>xi</sup> Samuel B. was initially reported as having served as a manager from 1830-42 by Kowsky, Francis R., *Introduction to the Reprint of the Art of Landscape Architecture*, (ASLA Centennial Reprint 1915), p.xx, but we have received documentation from Haverford's archivist that this was instead Samuel Parsons who served as a manager until his death in 1841.
- <sup>xii</sup> Haverford College Board of Managers meeting minutes, 1831-1877, Haverford College Board of Managers records, [http://archives.tricolib.brynmaur.edu/repositories/5/archival\\_objects/620880](http://archives.tricolib.brynmaur.edu/repositories/5/archival_objects/620880)
- <sup>xiii</sup> Waller, *History of the Town of Flushing*, *supra n* at p. 198.
- <sup>xiv</sup> "History of Queens County, New York" (New York. W.W. Munsell & Co. 1882), chapter "The Town and Village of Flushing", pp. 74-143, <http://bklyn-genealogy-info.stevemorse.org/Queens/history/flushing.html> (accessed September 2, 2021)
- <sup>xv</sup> Obituary of Samuel B. Parsons, *Flushing Times* (Flushing, New York), January 5, 1906, as quoted in James Driscoll, "Flushing in the Early Nineteenth Century," in *Angels of Deliverance: The Underground Railroad in Queens, Long Island, and Beyond*, ed. Wini Warren (Flushing, New York: Queens Historical Society, 1999), 81.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Driscoll, *Angels of Deliverance* at p. 76.
- <sup>xvii</sup> NY Times, August 2, 1862, LOCAL INTELLIGENCE; The Anniversary of West Indian Emancipation. CELEBRATION AT FLUSHING.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Snodgrass, *The Underground Railroad*, at pp.400-01.
- <sup>xix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xx</sup> "Preliminary Study Report: Proposed Local Abolition Row, New Bedford, Massachusetts", [https://s3.amazonaws.com/newbedford-ma/wp-content/uploads/sites/46/20200501093522/Case-20-17\\_Local-Historic-District\\_Abolition-Row-Preliminary-Report.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/newbedford-ma/wp-content/uploads/sites/46/20200501093522/Case-20-17_Local-Historic-District_Abolition-Row-Preliminary-Report.pdf)

- <sup>xxi</sup> Snodgrass, *The Underground Railroad*, supra n, at p. 276.
- <sup>xxii</sup> We are still exploring this family connection. Robert Bowne's son John L. previously married an Elizabeth Howland in New Bedford in 1809 so this was not the first time the Bowne and Howland families had intermarried. Robert (Bowne) Howland, Samuel B.'s brother-in-law, travelled abroad with Samuel B. after Robert's graduation from Haverford. Emery, William M., *The Howland Heirs: Being the Story of a Family and a Fortune and the Inheritance of a Trust Established for Mrs. Hetty H. R. Green* (New Bedford. E. Anthony & Sons 1919), pp. 169-170; 192-93.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> See Petrus, A., "The Parsons Legacy", Metropostcard.com, Blog Archive 2, July 2007-December 2007, <http://www.metropostcard.com/metropcbloga2.html> (accessed September 9, 2021)
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Flushing, New York in Historical Photographs, supra.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Snodgrass, *The Underground Railroad*, at pp. 400-401.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> "Henry Ward Beecher", Plymouth church website, <http://www.plymouthchurch.org/beecher> (accessed September 2, 2021)
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Unpublished bulletin on the history of the First Congregational Church of Flushing, November 11, 1944, quoted in James Driscoll, "Flushing in the Early Nineteenth Century," in *Angels of Deliverance: The Underground Railroad in Queens, Long Island, and Beyond*, ed. Wini Warren (Flushing, New York: Queens Historical Society, 1999), 83.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, July 19, 1851, p. 2; Waller, *History of the Town of Flushing*, supra n, p. 196.
- <sup>xxvix</sup> Hanson, Scott R., *City of Gods, Religious Freedom, immigration, and Pluralism in Flushing, Queens* (New York: Fordham University Press 2016), citing March 20, 1862 Flushing Journal.
- <sup>xxx</sup> In a later sermon at his church in 1857, Dr. Cheever preached on the topic "God against Slavery: and the freedom and duty of the pulpit to rebuke it, as a sin against god", <https://www.worldcat.org/title/god-against-slavery-and-the-freedom-and-duty-of-the-pulpit-to-rebuke-it-as-a-sin-against-god/oclc/672010384?referer=di&ht=edition>
- <sup>xxxi</sup> The Obligation of Man To Obey The Civil Law: Its Ground, And Its Extent, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/obligationofmant00stor>
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Furman, Bob, "Heights History: The Rev. Richard Salter Storrs", Brooklyn Heights Blog (April 28, 2011), <http://brooklynheightsblog.com/archives/28718> (accessed September 9, 2021)
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Bowne Street Community Church website, <http://www.nycago.org/Organs/Qns/html/BowneStComm.html> (accessed September 10, 2021)
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Flushing, New York in Historical Photographs, supra.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> New York City Office of Register, Deeds, Lieber 421, page 268, dated September 24, 1873. A notation on the map reads "Miss M.B. Parsons "The Old Bowne House" the Oldest House in Flushing, Built in 1661.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Flushing House Founders, Flushing House website, <https://flushinghouse.com/about-who-we-are/united-adult-ministries-is-the-culmination-of-a-tradition-of-service-originating-in-1916-brooklyn/> (accessed September 10, 2021)
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Snodgrass, *The Underground Railroad*, at pp.400-01.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> "The Return of Ferry Service to the Bronx", the Bronx Historian, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2018-19 (PDF).
- <sup>xl</sup> Greenberg, Dorothee von Huene, "Moses Pierce, Westchester's Friend of Freedom", *The Westchester Historian*, Volume 88, No. 1, Winter 2012 (PDF) See also Velsor, Kathleen G., *Angels of Deliverance* at p. 63.
- <sup>xli</sup> Obituary for Robert B. Parsons, *New York Daily Tribune*, November 6, 1898, quoted in James Driscoll, "Flushing in the Early Nineteenth Century," in *Angels of Deliverance: The Underground Railroad in Queens, Long Island, and Beyond*, ed. Wini Warren (Flushing, New York: Queens Historical Society, 1999), 60.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Snodgrass, *The Underground Railroad*, at pp. 400-401.

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## NEWS & EVENTS

Bowne House is now open for guided tours and is welcoming visitors by advance appointment. We also offer educational lessons for school groups of all grade levels, available as both in-person and virtual programs. These programs cover a variety of topics that complement New York City social studies curriculums. Please contact [bownehouseeducation@gmail.com](mailto:bownehouseeducation@gmail.com) to schedule a tour or book an educational lesson for students.

Bowne House provides a variety of virtual content for website visitors, including new research articles, podcast episodes, event listings and our “BH From Home” webpage. Visit [www.bownehouse.org](http://www.bownehouse.org) to learn more!

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