

## focus on New York

# “They Being Long Dead, Yet Speak”: Three Centuries in the Bowne House Archives



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The Bowne House Archives tell the story of the Bowne House, a historic site in Flushing, Queens, and the influential family who lived there for nine generations. The house was built in 1661 by John Bowne, an English settler in Dutch New Netherland. Persecuted for his Quaker faith, Bowne is remembered for his defense of religious tolerance.

Bowne’s numerous descendants have included farmers and merchants, Quaker preachers and missionaries, business leaders, politicians, philanthropists, educators, society hostesses, horticulturists, civic leaders, and abolitionists. Many of them valued John Bowne’s legacy of justice and personal liberty, as well as the ancestral home and its original contents.

Bowne House was continually occupied by family members until 1945, when the Bowne House Historical Society was formed to purchase the building. When the house became a museum in 1947, heirlooms from three centuries formed the core of its collections, while family papers found onsite formed the core of the Archives.

Today, the site is owned and operated by the Bowne House Historical Society. The quaint farmhouse, noted as an example of Anglo-Dutch colonial architecture, is considered the second-oldest intact building in New York State. Dedicated as a “shrine to religious freedom,” the house was recently inducted into the U.S. National Park Service’s National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. All of these designations have relied on evidence from the Bowne House Archives.

Even the 1661 date of construction is drawn from John Bowne’s account book, which contains the first mention of the homestead, noted in conjunction with the first annual gathering of Quakers in America, a precursor to the New England Yearly Meeting:

In the yeare 1661 upon the 11 day of ye fourth month English account [June] wee went from our hous at flushing towards rodiland [Rhode Island] to the generall meeting where wee did stay nyne days time . . .

The Bowne House Archives offer a microcosm of New York history, with over three centuries glimpsed through the perspective of one Quaker family and community.

The three largest collections document three phases in the life of the Bowne House: the colonial-era Bowne Family Papers of Flushing, Long Island; the predominantly nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Parsons and Bowne Family Papers; and the post-1945 Records of the Bowne House Historical Society.

The Bowne Family Papers contain the personal and religious correspondence of John and Hannah (Feake) Bowne and their descendants; early land

The Bowne House in Flushing, Queens, New York City (Bowne House Historical Society).



John Bowne on trial before  
Director-General Stuyvesant.  
*Scribner's Magazine*, June 1881.



deeds and indentures; Quaker Meeting records; and miscellaneous documents relating to extended family and members of the Bownes' social circle.

The correspondence files reveal the Bownes' network of contacts with other Friends, both prominent and obscure, who lived throughout the colonies and elsewhere in the Atlantic world. Multiple West Indies Meetings, for example, are represented in the letters. Miscellaneous Quaker records, discovered in the Bowne House attic in the 1870s, fill gaps in the Flushing Meeting Records now at Swarthmore Friends' Library. The family's Quaker correspondence and custodianship of Quaker records and letters illustrate the leading role the Bownes continued to play in the faith even after John Bowne's time. Finally, land records help reconstruct the generational growth of the Bowne estate to more than 200 acres. Since the Flushing town records were destroyed by fire in 1788, these documents may be the only surviving colonial town records. The collection is supplemented by reproductions of John Bowne's journal and account book. (Bowne descendants sold the originals before the house became a museum.)

### "A Shrine to Religious Freedom"

In the year 1662 . . . on the first day of 7th month Resolved the Scout came to my house at Vlishing [Flushing] with a company of menn with sords and gonns . . . — *The Journal of John Bowne*<sup>2</sup>

By 1662 John and Hannah Bowne were hosting Quaker meetings at Bowne House, in defiance of a ban by New Netherland's Director-General, Peter Stuyvesant. That September John Bowne was arrested, tried, jailed, and forcibly exiled from New Netherland after he steadfastly refused to renounce his religion or pay the fines imposed. Forcibly transported to Dublin, Bowne voluntarily traveled to Amsterdam to clear his name and seek permission to return.

In Amsterdam, Bowne petitioned the Dutch West India Company, invoking the 1645 patent of Flushing, which guaranteed "Liberty of Conscience."<sup>3</sup> The Board of Directors equivocated to Bowne's face, expressing sympathy for his arguments, while refusing to release his confiscated goods or give him passage home—unless he agreed to publicly respect the very laws he found unjust. Yet unbeknownst to him, Bowne had already prevailed: the Board had sent

Stuyvesant a written rebuke regarding his treatment of Bowne and ordered Stuyvesant to tolerate peaceful Quaker worship.<sup>4</sup> Only the public vindication that Bowne sought was denied to him. Bowne penned a furious rebuke to the Board for their hypocrisy and left Amsterdam in a rage.

He undertook an epic voyage home at his own expense, traveling via England and the West Indies, only reuniting with his family in March 1664.<sup>5</sup> The Dutch harassed him no further. When the English took control of New Netherland in September 1664, they agreed to extend the policy of relative toleration, rather than impose the Church of England upon the colony's citizens. John Bowne continued to hold Quaker worship services in his home until his death in 1695.

We know of John Bowne's ordeal from his journal, quoted above, and the letters he wrote to his wife from prison in New Amsterdam and exile in Amsterdam. He also saved letters of introduction from Quaker notables—including George Fox, founder of the Quaker faith—to Friends in Amsterdam who urged assistance for his case. Copies of Bowne's eloquent petition to the Board of Directors survive in English and Dutch.

In addition to hosting worship services, John Bowne helped to endow the Friends Cemetery (1676) and the Flushing Meeting House (1694), also an official landmark. Quaker records intermingled with the family papers show that John Bowne's legacy of peaceful resistance inspired future generations. A notable example is a Revolutionary War-era petition from New York City Quakers to the commander of the British Army, signed by several Bownes and related family members. Given their pacifism, the petitioners wanted to be exempted from serving in the city watch, a civilian safety patrol—since their service would free other men for war.

Milbert & Motte, "View of Flushing (Long Island). Mr Bowne's house," 1825. New York Public Library Digital Collections.



### **"Speaking Woman": Records of Colonial Quaker Women**

The Bowne Family Papers also document some remarkable colonial women. A 1655 deed describes a purchase of 112 acres in Flushing by Elizabeth Hallett—the mother of Hannah (Feake) Bowne—in her own name. Elizabeth (Fones) (Winthrop) (Feake) Hallett (1610–c. 1673),

who braved prosecution and disgrace after leaving her mentally ill husband for William Hallett, was the focus of Anya Seton's 1958 novel, *The Winthrop Woman*, and Missy Wolfe's 2012 biography, *Insubordinate Spirit: A True Story of Life and Loss In Earliest America, 1610–1665*.

Hannah (Feake) Bowne was herself an exceptional, if lesser-known, figure: she was an early female Quaker minister and missionary. In 1675 and 1676 she left John Bowne in charge of their children and went to preach overseas, armed with a letter of support from George Fox himself. Hannah's letters from her husband, and his 1677/8 eulogy at her memorial service in London, where death ended her journey, illuminate her travels down the American Eastern Seaboard, through Ireland and England, and into the Low Countries as far as Embden—now in Germany—where she addressed crowds in English and Dutch.

John and Hannah corresponded with other pioneering women like Elizabeth Hooten, the first female Quaker missionary, and particularly with Elizabeth's "yokemate," or traveling companion, Joan Brocksopp. Mention of itinerant female preachers such as Patience Brayden and Susanna Morris appear in the eighteenth-century letters of Dinah Underhill, the great-granddaughter of Captain John Underhill who married John Bowne III.

### **The Parsons & Bowne Family Papers**

When John Bowne's great-grandson, John Bowne IV, died in 1804, the house passed to his widow and four daughters. Daughter Mary Bowne married Quaker minister and abolitionist Samuel Parsons (1774–1841) and their children eventually inherited the property. In about 1838, Parsons began the renowned Parsons and Co. Nursery on the former Bowne estate, to provide an occupation for his sons. Mary Bowne's mother and sisters remained at Bowne House, which also became home to their unmarried nieces

and nephews throughout the nineteenth century. Three generations of Bowne and Parsons "bluestockings" traveled and moved in cultured circles. The Parsons and Bowne Family Papers supplement their stories with antique photographs and prints, maps, books, and ephemera. Nearly 100 late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century vintage postcards document the extended grand tour of Robert Bowne Parsons' daughters Anna and Bertha to destinations that included Europe, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Morocco.

### **Abolition and the Underground Railroad**

Various family members took up the abolitionist cause. John Bowne IV's brother, Robert Bowne, was an entrepreneur and philanthropist who, in 1775, founded Bowne and Co. Printers, New York's oldest continually operating business. (Visitors to Lower Manhattan can visit a recreation of the original print shop at the South Street Seaport Museum.) In 1785, Robert Bowne became a founding member of the New York Manumission Society, and later served as a trustee of the African Free School.

From the 1830s, the children of Samuel and Mary (Bowne) Parsons befriended anti-slavery activists and aided the Underground Railroad. The Archives contain a letter of introduction for Robert Bowne Parsons written by prominent abolitionist Lewis Tappan and intended for Gerrit Smith at his Peterboro estate, a major nexus of the Underground Railroad in upstate New York.

In 2016 we discovered a letter carried by a fugitive slave to William Bowne Parsons, instructing him to "assist this colored brother" in his escape. This 1850 dispatch from Rev. Simeon Jocelyn, vice-president of the New York State Vigilance Committee, was sent while William was resident at Bowne House with his maiden aunts and finally provided documentary evidence of the site's long-rumored ties to the Underground Railroad.

The thriving Parsons Nursery business would have provided cover for the Underground Railroad activities of William's brothers, Samuel and Robert, who served as conductors. Although we have few records of their horticultural activities, Samuel Bowne Parsons is represented in the archives by his fragmentary memoir of the nursery, including his diplomatic mission to procure frost-resistant bees from Italy.

Finally, the Records of the Bowne House Historical Society document the preservation activities of the museum and include decades of meeting minutes, architectural surveys, historic structures reports, research files, ephemera, and extensive correspondence. Family historians with Long Island Quaker ancestry may find the genealogical information and memorabilia donated by Bowne descendants over the years to be an interesting and largely untapped resource. ♦

The Bowne House Archives is embarking on a project to digitize and transcribe its historic documents and make them available to researchers online. Meanwhile, for more information or to download finding aids, visit [bownehouse.org/archives](http://bownehouse.org/archives) or contact [office@bownehouse.org](mailto:office@bownehouse.org) with queries.

## NOTES

- 1 John Bowne Account Book (1649–1703), photostatic reproduction, Early Bowne and Historic Flushing Research Collection, Bowne House Archives, Flushing, New York, 2. (Bowne's descendants donated the original manuscript to the New York Public Library in the 1920s: see [archives.nypl.org/mss/357](http://archives.nypl.org/mss/357).)
- 2 John Bowne, *The Journal of John Bowne (1650–1694)*, ed. Herbert Ricard (New York: Polyanthos Press, 1975), 19.
- 3 Notably, this same patent, or town charter, had also inspired the 1657 Flushing Remonstrance, a document signed by thirty residents to protest the ban on Quakers and affirm a nascent principle of religious toleration. Although Bowne himself was not a signer, two of his relatives by marriage—Tobias Feake and Edward Farrington—were arrested for their role in drafting the Remonstrance, and Bowne clearly absorbed its sentiments. The Remonstrance stated, "For wee are bounde by the law of God and man to doe good unto all men and evill to noe man, and this is according to the Pattennt and Charter of our Towne . . . which we are not willing to infringe and violate." For a full transcription, see "Flushing Remonstrance," New York State Archives. New Netherland. Council. Dutch colonial council minutes, 1638–1665, series A1809, vol. 8, at [digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Detail/objects/56218](http://digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Detail/objects/56218).
- 4 "Letter, Directors to Stuyvesant," New York State Archives. New York (Colony). Council. Dutch colonial administrative correspondence, 1646–1664, series A1810–78, vol. 15, at [digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Detail/objects/50523](http://digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Detail/objects/50523).
- 5 During the crossing, the navigator became lost and had to turn around halfway across the Atlantic; the vessel was pursued by an Ottoman slave ship; at least one fellow Quaker died and was buried at sea; and the voyage took nearly nine months.



Left: Bowne House sign; letter carried by a freedom-seeker on the Underground Railroad to William Bowne Parsons in 1850 (Bowne House Archives). Above: A photo from the 1947 Bowne House opening, *Long Island Star-Journal*.