

The Bowne House Historical Society, Inc

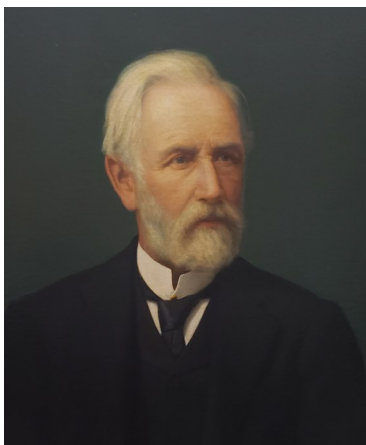


Recognized for the strength of its extensive archival holdings, Bowne House is now designated by the National Park Service as a facility for the research of Underground Railroad history in New York State. We would like to acknowledge and thank Humanities New York for the generous support provided for preparing this application.

From Embryo to Fruitful Maturity: The Development of the Prince and Parsons Nurseries in Flushing, New York in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

From its earliest discovery, America was seen as a source of botanical, as well as mineral and territorial wealth. The early nursery trade was centered in and around the cities of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, but was also conducted in Virginia and the Carolinas, often with the support of Royal or noble patrons eager to import the newly-discovered American plants. New horticultural novelties were anxiously anticipated in the European capitals, as well as the colonial towns and an active trade network developed between England, Holland, Sweden, and the north and mid-Atlantic colonies. This network provided new American plants to Old World collectors and botanists and satisfied their ravenous appetites for information about the new continent. Colonial and national collectors received the fashionable and familiar plants they needed to maintain currency with English and continental standards. The interest and trade in new plants transcended political boundaries.

New York was an early center of horticultural achievement and according to Ulisse P. Hedrick in *A History of American Horticulture to 1860*, "the best farmers and gardeners in the American colonies settled along the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers. The Europeans were Dutch and French Huguenot people who excelled with the plow, the spade, and the hoe. In other colonies, most of the English and French, with the exception of the Huguenots, had impossible dreams of getting rich raising indigo, olives, silkworms, and European grapes, to which the hard-headed Hollanders were not subject."¹



Robert Bowne Parsons
Portrait

Flushing was recorded as a site of tree culture from 1647 and Huguenot settlers, starting in 1685, brought new varieties and skills with them to their new home. Horticulture flourished in the village and Flushing maintained a virtual monopoly on the American nursery business until the 1860s. The identification of Flushing with horticulture and botany was so pervasive that the first steamboat between Flushing and lower Manhattan was named the *Linnaeus*. Even today, venerable trees gracing streets, lawns, and gardens in New York and along the eastern seaboard can be traced to their origins in one of the Flushing nurseries, and street names in Flushing commemorate several early local nurserymen. The following description will concentrate on the two most notable Flushing nurseries, The Prince and Parsons Nurseries.

In 1737 at Flushing Landing, Robert Prince, descended from Governor Thomas Prince, who had come to Plymouth Colony in 1621, started Prince Nursery, the first commercial nursery in America, though Prince had been propagating trees and shrubs for his own property since 1700. His son William (1725-1802) operated the nursery until his retirement in 1793 and the nursery gained an international reputation during that time. The original site was eight acres, later expanded in 1792 to twenty-eight acres. He married Anne Thorne in 1750 and they had 13 children, though only four survived. The Duke of Clarence, later William IV, was entertained at the nursery in 1782, and General Howe had guards placed at the nursery during the British occupation in 1783, allowing ships to leave the

¹*Ibid*, 53.

embargoed harbor with shipments of plants bound for England. Later, Prince also supplied plants for the gardens of the Empress Josephine at Malmaison.

Prince was the first American nursery to advertise ornamental plants extensively, and a notice in the *New York Mercury* on March 14, 1774 lists *Magnolias*, *Catalpas*, mulberries, filberts, and several fruit trees. Their lengthy stock lists were published periodically and included many American fruit tree varieties, like the Rhode Island Greening, Esopus, Spitzenburg, and Newtown Pippin apples. General Washington had visited the nursery with John Adams in 1790, shortly after his inauguration as President, and was entertained by Prince. He commented disparagingly on the 'trifling' selection of shrubs and called the selection of flowers "not numerous", though he appreciated the selection of fruit trees. Jefferson visited the nursery in 1791 as Secretary of State and was much more favorably impressed, ordering large quantities of plants for delivery to Monticello. Jefferson was also associated with Prince's Nursery on the May 24th birthday of Linnaeus in 1823, when Samuel Latham Mitchill, Jefferson's former congressional lieutenant, proposed that he and Jefferson, honorary members of the Linnaean Society of Paris, simultaneously honor the man who united "all nations under one language in natural history", Jefferson from his retreat at Poplar Forest and Mitchill from Prince's Nursery, where a bust of Linnaeus presided over the entrance hall of the Prince homestead.

After William's retirement, the nursery passed to two of his sons, William, Jr. (1766-1842) and Benjamin. A third son, John, left the business and settled near Schenectady. The two brothers split the nursery amicably, Benjamin keeping the original site at Flushing Landing, renaming it the Old American Nursery. William, Jr. purchased an 80-acre site north of the original nursery in 1793 and named it the Linnaean Botanic Garden and Nurseries, the property expanding to one hundred thirteen acres by 1850, sixty acres within the village limits. William was the more successful of the two brothers, and the Old American Nursery had closed by 1825. The property was sold as building lots and the original house was torn down after 1850.

William, Jr. was a member of the horticultural societies of London and Paris, of the Imperial Society of

Georgofili of Florence as well as the principal societies in the United States. A meeting of prominent horticulturists in 1823, where DeWitt Clinton delivered an address, was held at his residence.

Prince's offered plants from the Lewis and Clark expedition, from which they received shares from the extensive seed collections of western American plants. *Mahonia aquifolium* was particularly popular and as it became known in the east, the price rose until plants were being offered by the nursery in 1825 for twenty-five dollars apiece, a huge sum at the time.

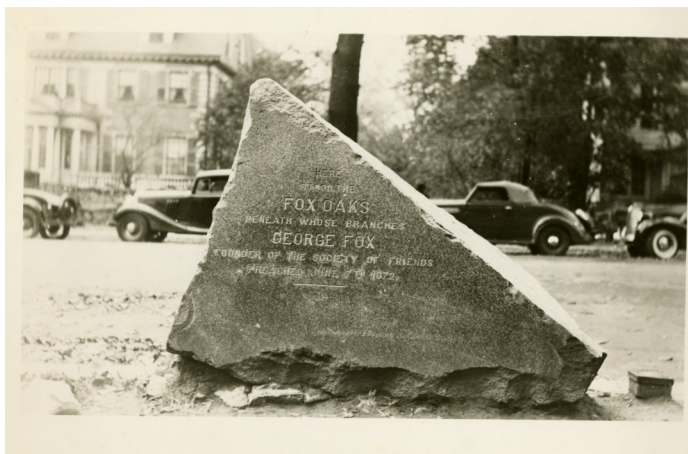
He brought many varieties of fruits into the United States, sent many trees and plants to Europe and systematized the nomenclature of the best-known fruits, such as the Bartlett pear and the Isabella grape, which he introduced to United States viticulture, which was long one of the mainstays.² The London Horticultural Society named the 'William Prince' apple in his honor. William Prince published catalogs of the nursery listings periodically and the 1841 edition listed 272 apple varieties, 420 pears, 109 cherries, 156 plums, 116 grapes, 147 gooseberries, and several other fruits in volume. There were 273 ornamental shrub species and varieties, 196 ornamental trees, 111 conifers, 73 vines, 680 roses, 800 perennial plants, and 85 culinary herbs, a list unequalled

by any nursery today. From 1819-1835, he operated an experimental vineyard, importing 400 varieties of grape from the Luxembourg in Paris and conducting hybridization experiments on native varieties to produce grapes better adapted to North American climatic conditions. William published additional books as well, including *A Treatise on Horticulture* in 1828.

William, Jr.'s son,

William Robert Prince (1795-1869), took over the nursery from his father around 1842. He introduced the Lombardy Poplar (*Populus nigra* v. *italica*), the symbol of American democracy, the Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) and promoted the American silk industry, planting several vast mulberry plantations in southern states. Mulberries became so popular that young trees served as currency in Flushing shops in 1830.

Like his father, he operated the nursery more as a scientific, rather than commercial, undertaking, though it remained successful during this period. He married



Fox Oaks Stone Photo - BH Archives

² Bailey, L.H. *Cyclopedia of American Horticulture*, 1435-7.

Charlotte C. Collins, the daughter of a Rhode Island governor, in 1826, and traveled through the eastern states with Dr. John Torrey of Columbia College and Professor Thomas Nuttall of Harvard. He botanized California in 1849-50 while others searched the area for gold. He wrote several volumes, including *A Treatise on the Vine* in 1830.

Upon W. R. Prince's death in 1869, the nursery closed. A notice in the *Long Island Times* on November 17, 1870 advertised a closeout of the nursery stock. The land was sold as family members died and subdivided for development. Parts of the garden were still open to schoolchildren and visitors in 1880, though the house and garden had dwindled to a single city block by 1900.³ The building was finally demolished in 1942 after Robert Moses rejected a proposal to move the house several blocks southwest to the World's Fair site at Flushing Meadow Park when the house was threatened by bridge construction. Today the nursery site is largely occupied by multifamily housing and small businesses. The corner of Prince Street and Linnean Place is currently occupied by an auto repair shop.

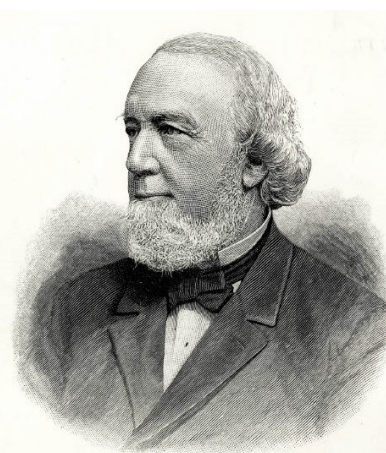
Horticulture was becoming allied with social betterment through the published advisements of Boston agricultural reformers John Lowell and Josiah Quincy in the 1820's and 1830's. Both believed "horticulture represented the practical farmer's adaptation to modernization"⁴ amid a period of vast expansion and social upheaval in the young country. An interest in horticulture for wealthy merchants gave evidence of their ability to appreciate beauty and things which had no market value, thus symbolizing cultural refinement and the triumph over materialism.⁵

As the national enthusiasm for horticulture evolved from experimental farming to ornamental horticulture, there was a need for instruction in the practical matters of plant cultivation and selection. Standards of taste and accomplishment in the decorative and aesthetic arenas were provided by tastemakers like Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852), the son of a nurseryman in Newburgh, in the Hudson Valley. In volumes like *The*

Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening (1841) and *Cottage Residences* (1842), as well as through the pages of his periodical journal, *The Horticulturist*. Downing pronounced the rules for residential architecture and garden design, with digressions on public parks, cemeteries, orchards, viticulture, and visits to gardens that embodied his ideas of excellence. His viewpoint was largely drawn from the example of John Claudius Loudon (1783-1843) in England, and his influence was incalculable and his energy unflagging until his early death in a steamboat explosion on the Hudson River, near his home in Newburgh, en route to Washington, DC to discuss plans for a new national garden in the space currently occupied by the Mall.

The Parsons Nursery was the other nursery of major importance in Flushing. It was established in 1837 by Samuel Parsons (1774-1840). It soon became well known in America and Europe. According to Bertha Parsons, a daughter of his son, Robert Bowne Parsons "The master of Kew Gardens [Joseph Hooker], on a trip around the world, visited Flushing and said that nowhere had he seen a finer collection of rare and beautiful shrubs and trees."⁶

Samuel Parsons was a Quaker farmer who started the Commercial Gardens and Nursery in 1838 as a project for two of his four sons, Samuel Bowne Parsons (1819-1906) and Robert Bowne Parsons (1821-1898). Samuel was the son of James Parsons, a New York merchant who started James Parsons and Sons Co., a shipping and trading business, in 1764. Samuel recorded his intentions to form the nursery in an entry to the journal he began as a teenager and kept for 47 years until his death. The original diary was transcribed by two granddaughters in fading brown ink in the early 20th c. and is stored in the Long Island Room at Queens Public Library. On April 10, 1837 he wrote "Much engaged in procuring trees for the commencement of a Nursery in order to keep two of my sons in the country remote from the temptations of large cities."⁷ Most of the diary is devoted to details of his spiritual life and Quaker faith, including extensive



S. B. Parsons

Samual B. Parsons portrait
1887 - Meehan

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³ Titus, Ruth. "A Famous Garden" *The Island Review* February 1900.

⁴ Thornton, Tamara Plakins. *Cultivating: The Meaning of Country Life Among the Boston Elite 1785-1860*, 147.

⁵ Thornton, Tamara Plakins. *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life Among the Boston Elite 1785-1860*, 162.

⁶ Reminiscences of Bertha R. Parsons.

⁷ Parsons, Bertha. "A Famous Nursery of Old Flushing (Some Personal Recollections of Miss Bertha R. Parsons)" *Flushing Garden Club Newsletter*, undated.

travels undertaken to attend and address meetings in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Quebec. Very few entries describe the offerings or operations of the nursery. Even the birth of his children is mentioned casually or not at all.

The Bowne House site has been subjected to archeological research by Dr. James Moore and his students at Queens College. Excavations have revealed that the grade has been changed very little since the construction of the house. Indeed, the garden may be the longest remaining open cultivated area in New York City. Between 4-8" of fill have been added over more than 350 years, primarily during construction of the adjacent apartment buildings in the early 20th century.

Parsons purchased a farmhouse slightly north of the Bowne House, at the end of the current Bowne Avenue, shortly before his marriage and the couple lived here their entire married life, though the births of his children are all recorded to have occurred in the Bowne homestead, which was occupied by Mary Bowne and her sister, Ann Bowne, until the latter's death in 1863, when the house passed to Parsons' daughter, also named Mary Bowne Parsons.

The original Parsons Nursery was established on the Bowne property. In 1835, Samuel enclosed the Bowne House property and his diary records the planting of 30 oaks of various species along Bowne Avenue, adjoining his property. When the oaks were planted the two enormous Fox Oaks across Bowne Avenue still stood, where George Fox, the founder of the Quaker faith, had spoken during his tour of the colonies in 1772, though they were felled by storms in the 1860s and the site is now marked by a commemorative stone marker. Bowne's effort to beautify the village, was called his 'prophetic mission' by Flushing Quaker preacher, Joseph John Gurney.⁸ Two of the trees remain, an enormous Turkey Oak (*Quercus cerris*) and a Bur Oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*). The sidewalks and curbs along Bowne Avenue were reconstructed about five years ago

and the original plans called for planting Sweetgums, but I was able to persuade the landscape architect to plant different oak species that would have been available in Parsons' to reference the original planting.

A map from 1854 roughly illustrates the organization of the property. A map from 1868 indicates the extent of the Bowne estate, including the Parsons Nursery, and the division of the property among the various Parsons heirs after Samuel's death in 1840.

Samuel Parsons, his wife and children, as well as several other family members were active in abolitionist activities and he wrote with great passion on the subject. Legend reports the transport of concealed escaped slaves in nursery wagons to ships for transport to free New England states and Canada and also identify the Bowne House as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Flushing was known as a racially mixed and tolerant community in the nineteenth century, as in the seventeenth,

when the original John Bowne was imprisoned and sent to Amsterdam in 1662 for trial and acquittal on the charge of holding outlawed Quaker meetings in his house, the catalyst for the Flushing Remonstrance of 1657, the first document claiming religious freedom in the new colonies.

All the Parsons children received shares in the estate upon the death of their mother on January 15, 1839

and their father on November 20, 1840. The two other sons were William Bowne Parsons (1823-1856), a farmer, and James Bowne Parsons (1809-1894), who lived on a site currently occupied by the eastern end of Flushing High School. The daughters were Jane Parsons (1826-1862) and Mary Bowne Parsons (1813-1878). Upon William's death his shares were divided equally among his siblings, though James mortgaged his shares to Samuel in 1864. James converted his property interests to Robert in 1848. Upon Jane's death in 1862, her shares descended to Mary.

Robert and Samuel continued to operate the nursery in Flushing and jointly shared the operation of

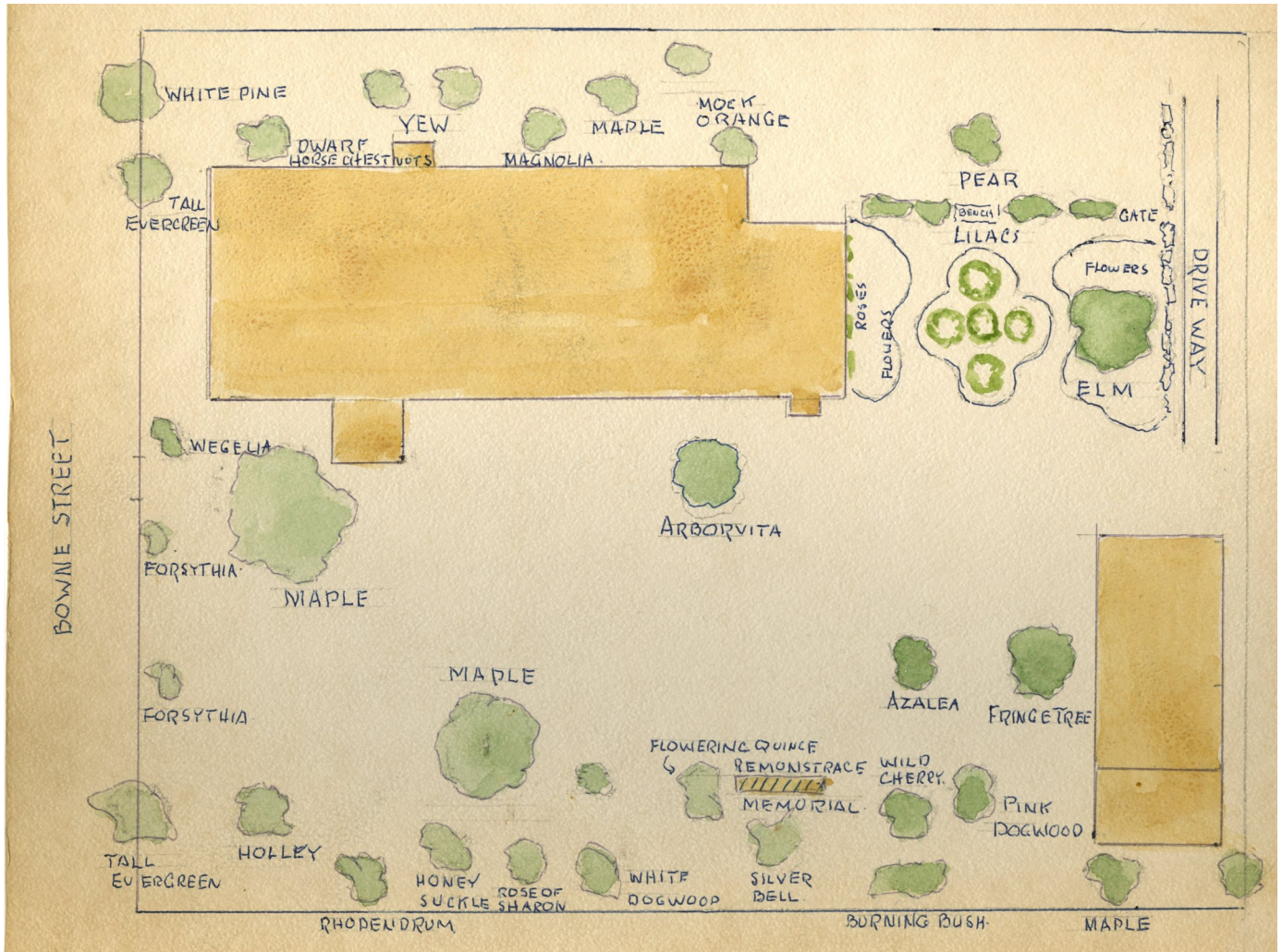


Fox Preaching Under The Oaks
Bowne House Postcard Collection

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⁸ Johansson, M.P and T.S.K. "Samuel Bowne Parsons and the Golden Bees" *Journal of Long Island History*, Vol. IX, No. 1, Winter-Spring 1969.

⁹ *Portrait and Biographical Record of Queens County (Long Island) New York...*,627.



Bowne House Garden Diagram - Post 1967

the nursery until 1871, when the partnership dissolved amicably. The brothers remained close and reunited to mount an exhibit in 1893 at the World Columbian Exhibition in Chicago.⁹

Robert lived in the Bowne homestead briefly before building his own residence two miles east of the nursery site, which he named *Liriodendra*. The house was torn down in the early 20th century and is currently occupied by a garden apartment, whose courtyard still contains many trees from the estate.

Samuel B. built an Italianate house around 1851 on a hilltop site east of his parents' house, currently occupied by Flushing High School, which was surrounded on two sides by an open columned piazza that overlooked the village of Flushing and Flushing Bay. The row of Bald Cypress along Northern Boulevard appears from photographs to have been planted

about the time of the school construction in 1917, rather than preserved from the earlier Parsons house.

The new residence was featured in the January 1857 issue of *The Horticulturist*, with an engraved perspective view on the frontispiece and plans of the first and second floors. Editor J. Jay Smith, who succeeded Downing as editor after his death, praised the house as "both elegant and eminently comfortable"¹⁰, and included a description of the nursery, which was praised as "reliable" and its proprietors, for whom "Character goes beyond profit"¹¹, and listed a few of the rarities available from the nursery. Samuel B. Parsons was a frequent contributor to *The Horticulturist* on a variety of subjects, including an observation on dwarf pears in the same issue.

Samuel B. Parsons traveled to Europe in 1845 to study horticulture and started a plantation in Florida

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¹⁰ Smith, J. Jay. *The Horticulturist*, January 1857, 28.

¹¹ Ibid, 23.

¹² From a genealogical document sent by Judson Parsons of Medford, Oregon.

in 1846. He went to Europe again in 1859 when he was commissioned by the U.S. Government to study agriculture and horticulture on Sicily and the Aeolian Islands. On his return, he brought back the Italian honeybee and “some men skilled in their culture”¹² from the trip, which had never been successfully raised in the U.S. He was also responsible for the introduction of many rare Asiatic trees and shrubs in the early days of trade with Japan, notably several ornamental varieties of Japanese Maple (*Acer palmatum*), first introduced to the U.S. by Parsons in 1841, which are still growing at the Kissena Nursery site. A prominent specimen is also growing at the front door of the Bowne House, but is in currently in serious decline. There is also an ancient Fringetree (*Chionanthus virginicus*) regenerating from the root system following damage to the remaining trunk a few feet southeast of the Bowne House.

The nursery was responsible for many introductions of plants new to American cultivation, including the Trifoliolate Orange (*Poncirus trifoliata*), the Japanese Larch (*Larix kaempferi*), and many Magnolias.¹³ Parsons was also prominent in advancing domestic grape culture and experimented with developing grape varieties hardy in the northeast U.S. by hybridizing European grapes with native American species. Samuel and Robert were the only commercial rhododendron propagators in the U.S. at the time and J.R. Trumpy, the Swiss nursery propagator, is recorded as grafting twenty five thousand plants a year.¹⁴ Samuel was the first grower to introduce the Brazilian seedless navel orange to Florida, where he propagated and grew citrus and other tropical plants on his plantation. In addition to horticultural work, Parsons was also President of the Flushing Bank for ten years and an active abolitionist, as were several male and female members of the Parsons and Bowne families. Unfortunately, the blight that devastated the American Chestnut in the early 20th c. was also introduced to the US in a shipment of Asian chestnuts introduced through the Parsons Nursery.

Samuel B. Parsons is often credited with importing the first Weeping Beech (*Fagus sylvatica* v. *pendula*) in 1847, though Barrett’s Nursery of Boston had actually been the first to offer the variety in 1841, following importation in 1836.¹⁵ An immense specimen stood adjacent to the Bowne House on the original nursery site until the central portion died in 1999, though several outer trunks air layered from tip shoots off the original clump remain. The source if the cuttings was recorded as Enghien, Belgium.

Samuel B. Parsons worked closely with Frederick Law Olmsted on the construction of Central Park and is recorded in his diary as present in London in 1859 selecting “a valuable collection of trees and shrubs to be shipped for Central Park next spring.”¹⁶ The record and customer ledgers of Parsons and Co. indicate sales to Olmsted over several years from the mid 1860s, as the name on sales records evolves from ‘F.L. Olmsted’ in Autumn 1866, to ‘Olmsted and Vaux’ in Spring 1867 to ‘Olmsted, Vaux and Co.’ in Spring 1868. Records provide insight into the extent of company involvement in the creation of the greatest gardens of the age. Sales to John Jay, John Jacob Astor, Matthew Vassar, and several of the great English nurserymen of the time, like William and James Backhouse, James Veitch, and George Jackman are recorded in meticulous handwritten record books.

Samuel B. Parsons started Parsons & Sons Co. Kissena Nurseries, Ltd. in 1868 and opened Parsons Avenue, now Parsons Boulevard, as a private road connecting the original Parsons Nursery on the north end with Kissena Nursery at the southern end. The name “Kissena” was selected by Samuel and is reported to be a Chippewa word meaning “cool water”, though the Chippewa are of course a Midwestern tribe and lived nowhere near the site of the nursery.

The nursery was located near a stop on Alexander T. Stewart’s Long Island Central Railroad, the Kissena Depot. Stewart was a Manhattan retailer who purchased 7000 acres on Long Island in 1869 for construction of a model suburb he named Garden City. The site and stop are illustrated on a map printed on the back page of the Spring 1873 nursery list, which also indicates the site of Parsons’ house and the extant Flushing Town Hall, built in the 1860s. Jamaica Avenue is now known as Kissena Boulevard and Kissena Avenue is now Rose Street.

Additional land was purchased for nursery expansion in 1872, when the first trees were planted. The nursery of Samuel B. Parsons and Sons Co. ran until 1906, when it was dissolved by a two-third vote of shareholders on December 6, with a debt of \$20,000.

The company had been reorganized four years previously, when the accumulated debt equaled \$60,000. New York City had begun acquiring land for Kissena Park in 1904, adding part of the nursery area upon the death of Samuel B. Parsons in 1906 and another

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¹³ Ibid, 43.

¹⁴ ⁹ *Flushing Evening Journal*. December 7, 1907.

¹⁵ Adams, Denise Wiles. *Restoring American Gardens*, 79.

¹⁶ Beveridge, Charles E. and Schuyler, David, eds. *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Vol. III*, 235.

sixty five acre parcel of wetland around Kissena Lake in 1907. A large portion of the nursery north of the current park boundary was sold in 1906 to local developers Paris and MacDougall, who built several Colonial Revival houses in the area, many of which remain. Paris' wife was the founder of the Flushing Garden Club.

Trees from the nursery remain today in a section of Kissena Park, concentrated in an area of approximately 20 acres, with the closely spaced, lined-out arrangement of many trees still apparent, in spite of their large size. Several of the trees remaining at the Kissena Nursery site are of such immense size that they're the largest of their species in New York state, notably an enormous Manchurian Linden (*Tilia mandshurica*). An inventory of the remaining trees was undertaken in 1936 by Leon Croizat of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and described in the Garden's publication, *Leaflets*.

"...the collection of trees and shrubs at Kissena Park contains a large number of rare and interesting species. It is possible, if not probable, that many of the rare trees in Central and Prospect Parks were derived from Kissena Park when it was occupied by the Parsons Nurseries. Possibly, also some of them came from the older Prince Nursery of Flushing.

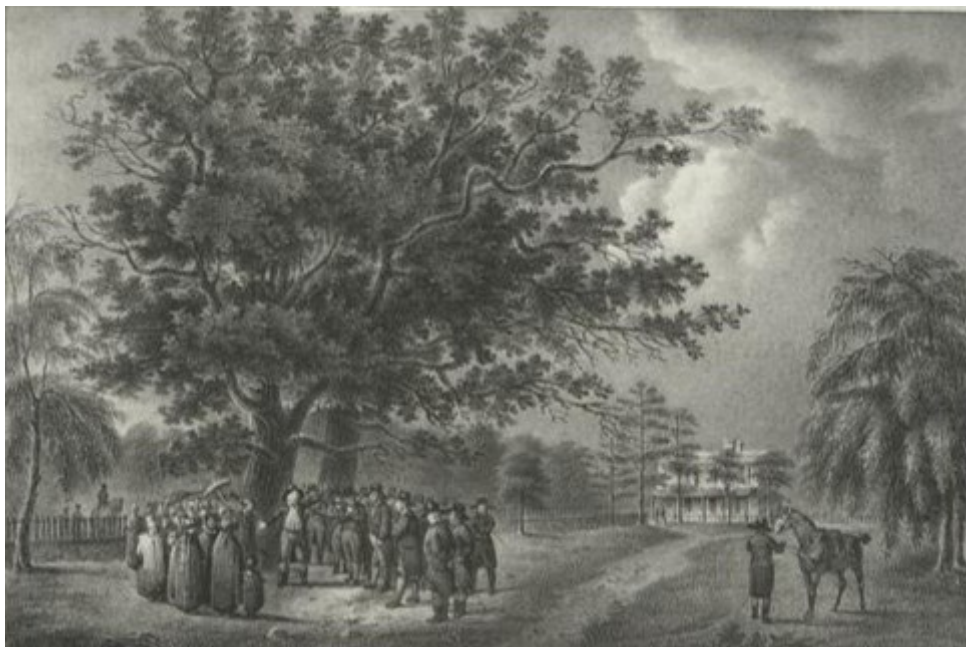
"From the time of the establishment of this nursery until 1907, succeeding generations of gentlemen-dealers among whom the Princes and Parsons stand foremost, introduced to Flushing, and therefore to America the choicest horticultural varieties from Europe and Asia. In addition, they developed their own varieties of useful and ornamental plants.

We know of no similar area in Greater New York, with the exception of course of the two botanic gardens, where a like aggregation of rare species may be found. Since this is so, it is of the utmost importance to the public and to science that this collection be maintained and preserved in its entirety."¹⁷

Parsons Boulevard, which connects the two nursery sites, is still lined with rare and unusual trees and many of the streets branching off from it are named after trees, such as Laburnum, Negundo, and Cherry Streets.

Many Parsons family members are buried in a family plot in Flushing Cemetery, an early garden cemetery established in 1853. Originally interred in a family cemetery on the Bowne House property, they were moved in the early 20th century to Flushing Cemetery. Robert Bowne Parsons was the first Treasurer of the Flushing Cemetery, chartered on May 5, 1853 and started on a site outside the Flushing village limits near the site later devoted to the Kissena Nurseries.

Flushing Cemetery was an early garden cemetery, established in 1853, shortly after passage of the Rural Cemetery Act in New York, which stipulated burials must occur outside city and village limits. At the time, the site lay directly outside Flushing village limits and the cemetery was developed in emulation of other examples like Green-Wood in Brooklyn and Mount Auburn in Cambridge and Watertown, MA, with curvilinear streets and extensive



Fox Oaks Print, Milbert & Mott - 1825 (NYPL)

plantings of ornamental trees and shrubs. Many members of the Parsons family, including Robert Bowne Parsons and Samuel Bowne Parsons are buried in the family plot there. There was a family cemetery adjacent to the Bowne house, near present day Roosevelt Avenue, but the graves were reinterred in the family plot at Flushing Cemetery in the early 20th C., when the property was sold and developed. Robert Bowne Parsons, was an early trustee

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¹⁷ Croizat, Leon. "The Rare Trees and Shrubs of Kissena Park, Flushing, L.I., N.Y." *Brooklyn Botanic Garden Leaflets, Series XXIV, Nos. 3-5, December 9, 1936, 9-10.*

¹⁸ Stuart, Schuyler Brandon. *The Story of Flushing Cemetery*, 13.

of Flushing Cemetery and several trees from the Parsons Nursery are extant, including several large Weeping Beech. Walt Whitman was reported to walk daily in Flushing Cemetery when he was teaching school in Flushing.¹⁸

Records related to Parsons and Co. and the various nurseries are stored in the Special Collections Department of the University Library at the West Campus of the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Twenty-six boxes of material in the collection include ledgers, journals, inventories, invoices, payroll receipts, deeds, mortgages and miscellaneous correspondence starting with the James Parsons & Company dry goods business in New York in 1768 up to expense and labor accounts from Kissena Nursery in 1884. The handwritten ledgers record nursery transactions with Olmsted and Vaux, John Jacob Astor, John Jay, Matthew Vassar for Springside, his Downing-designed garden in Poughkeepsie, and several of the great English nurserymen of the time, including William and James Backhouse, James Veitch, and George Jackman. Many years ago I'd admired an enormous *Magnolia acuminata* growing beside the John Jay homestead in Katonah and was delighted to see one of the trees listed on the bill of sale from Parsons Nursery to John Jay housed at Stony Brook.

His son, Samuel B. Parsons, Jr., was a prolific author on horticultural subjects as well and later served as the Chief Landscape Architect for the New York Parks Department on projects including Van Cortlandt Park and several Manhattan sites, including Broadway Mall, St. Nicholas Park, renovations to City Hall Park and Union Square, Seward Park, DeWitt Clinton Park, and Thomas Jefferson Park. The father and son are often confused or conflated in historical accounts.

The younger Samuel B. Parsons graduated from Haverford College in 1858 and the Yale Sheffield Scientific School in 1862. He served on the Sanitary Commission in the Civil War, directed for a time by Frederick Law Olmsted, and worked for his father after the War. He traveled, farmed near Lake Cayuga in central New York, then purchased and operated a farm in southern New Jersey for a time before he rejoined the family nursery at Kissena around 1875.

Starting in 1879, he served under Calvert Vaux in his office at 71 Broadway. He worked with Vaux on the design of several parks in lower Manhattan, including Canal Street Park, recently reconstructed after being buried under a roadbed for 75 years, Abingdon

and Jackson Squares, Mulberry Bend, now Columbus Park, on the site of the legendary Five Points slum, and Christopher Street Park.

When Vaux was appointed Landscape Architect for the New York City Parks Department in 1881, he brought along Parsons, who was appointed Superintendent of Planting. He was promoted to Superintendent of Public Works in 1885 and remained at the Parks Department until 1911, with an absence from 1898-1902. He was again promoted to Landscape Architect in 1898 and served as Parks Commissioner in 1905 and 1907, and as a member of the NY Improvement Commission.¹⁹

Working for the Parks Department did not prevent him from accepting outside work and he was selected by an Act of Congress on July 16, 1900 to design a new 350-acre park in the center of Washington, D.C. The plan was dismissed after adoption of the MacMillan Plan and the park was executed in a different form. In 1902, Parsons was commissioned by George Maston to design 1400-acre City Park, later Balboa Park, in San Diego, collaborating with George Cook. He was also actively involved in residential work and produced plans for several private estates, as well as campus plans for the University of Pennsylvania, Pomona College, Princeton, and Colorado College.

He was a prolific author on horticultural subjects whose titles included *Landscape Gardening* (1897), *How To Plan Home Grounds* (1905), and *The Art of Landscape Architecture* (1915). He was also pivotal in the formation of the American Society of Landscape Architects, and the first meeting for organizing the society was held in his office in New York, and he served for two terms as President of the organization.

Other Flushing nurseries included the Bloodgood Nursery, started by James Bloodgood in 1798, who sold the business around 1820 to Captain Joseph King. The nursery was responsible for introducing cultivars of Japanese Maple (*Acer palmatum* 'Bloodgood') and London Plane (*Platanus x acerifolia* 'Bloodgood') that are still available in the nursery trade today.

Capt. King's eighteenth-century house, Kingsland Manor, was moved from the original site in 1968 and now houses the Queens Historical Society and occupies a position on the old Parsons Nursery site. The house now stands next to the weeping beech (*Fagus sylvatica* v. *pendula*) planted by Samuel B. Parsons in 1847, and a large Japanese Golden Larch (*Pseudolarix amabilis*) called by Charles Sargent "the two most famous trees in

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¹⁹ Birnbaum, Charles. *Samuel Parsons, Jr: The Art of Landscape Architecture*, 5.

America." The two trees are still standing, though the central portion of the beech died in 1998 and the Golden Larch is in decline from the overhanging shade of an adjacent Willow Oak planted in the 1950s.

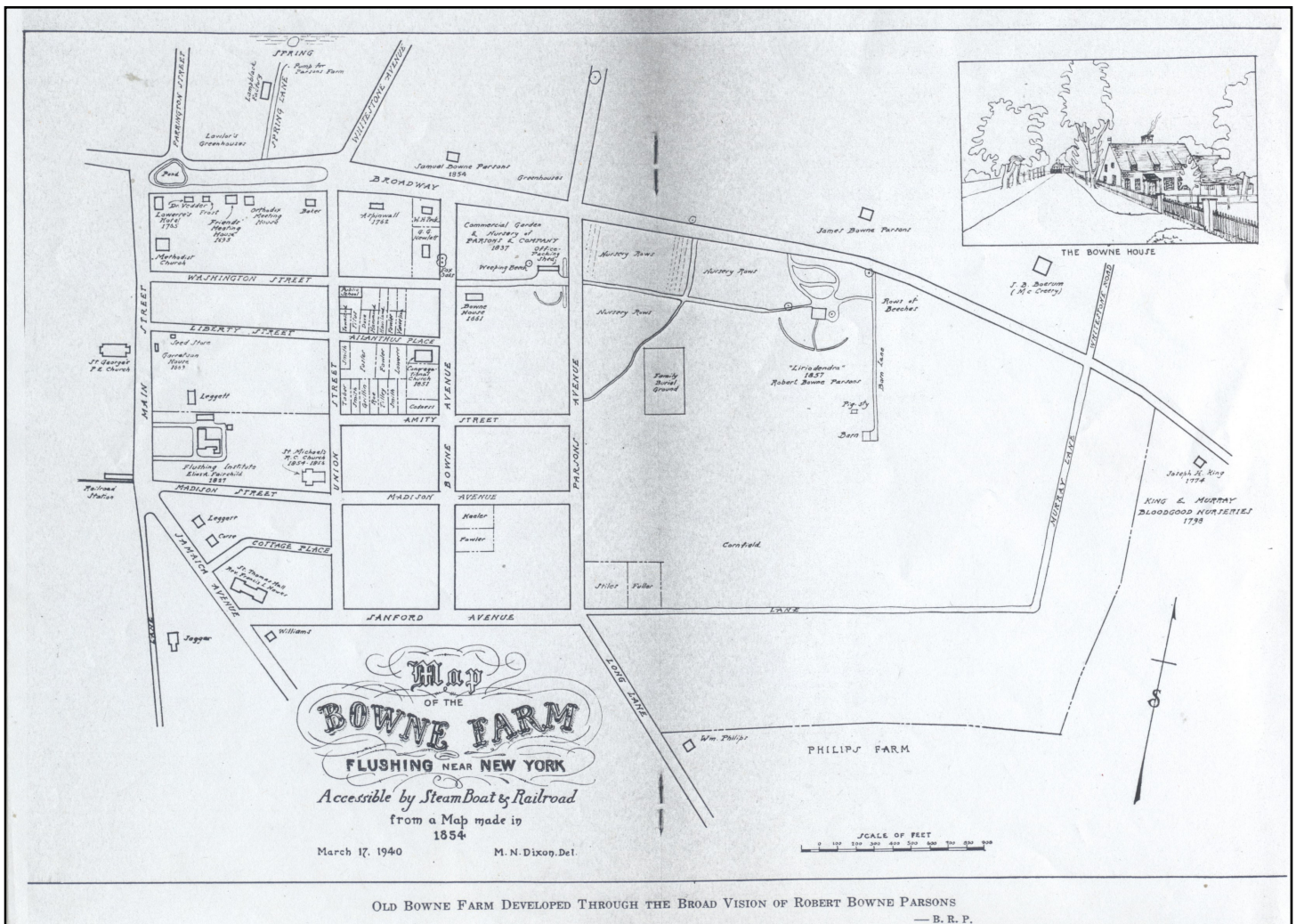
King gave the business to his son, Joseph King, who expanded the nursery. The nursery was later run by his nephew and other members of the Murray family under the name 'Murray and King Bloodgood Nurseries', and multiple listings of sales of nursery stock to the nursery by Parsons and Co. are listed in the Parsons record books over several years in the mid 19th C. The nursery was sold in the 1890s and run under the Bloodgood name by a succession of owners well into the 1930s.

Today, the horticultural legacy of Flushing is quickly disappearing under massive development pressure and the senescence of remnant trees. Groves of unusual trees from the Parsons Nursery remain in garden apartment courtyards developed in the early-to-mid twentieth century on portions of the Liriodendra site in Flushing. A significant chapter in the history of Flushing and New York can be read in this sylvan legacy.



About The Author

Steve Whitesell is a retired landscape architect with 27 years at the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, where he prepared a master plan for the open spaces encompassing the Bowne House, Margaret Carman Green, Weeping Beech Park, Kingsland Manor and the adjacent playground, all formerly part of the Parsons Nursery property. He has BFA and BLA degrees from the Rhode Island School of Design and a MA from the Bard Graduate Center in the former Garden History and Landscape Studies program, when he interned at the Bowne House. He currently lives upstate in rural Schoharie County. Steve is a member of the Bowne House Museum Advisory Committee



Map of Bowne farm - ca1854 (QBL)

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Holly Tour, December, date tbd.

We will join a group of Flushing historic sites with festive decorations and special programs for the holiday season.

Additional events are planned.

Please check our website: www.bownehouse.org for news and updates.

E-mail: bownehouseeducation@gmail.com

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Detail from Dripps' Map of Kings and Part of Queens Cos, 852 (NYPL)

Address Service Requested

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