

## Transcript of "The Parsons Nursery"

**Emily** Hello everyone and welcome back to the Bowne House Historical Society's podcast. My name is Emily and I am again joined by David. We chat about historical topics connected to the Bowne House that you might be unfamiliar with. Today's podcast will be a deeper dive into the Parsons family's tree nursery. Last time we talked about Samuel Parson's interest in beginning this business. We encourage you all to go back and listen to that episode first, but for now David, can you summarize his intentions?

**David** Thanks, Emily. Samuel was deeply connected to his Quaker religion. He saw the nursery as a way to keep his sons William and Robert away from the vice of the city and connected to nature.

**Emily** High stakes! But it was a good plan because it seems to have worked; the nursery developed into a successful business and his son's remained in Flushing to run it. Samuel started the nursery, named "Parsons and Co.'s Commercial Garden and Nursery", around 1838, when he was living in his marital residence near the Bowne House. In 1839, after Samuel's wife Mary Bowne Parsons passed away, Samuel and his unmarried children all moved into the Bowne House.

**David** Their company became an important part in the horticulture industry at large. But it was not the only nursery based in Flushing. In fact, the area was a hotbed of horticulture including the prominent Prince and Bloodgood nurseries as well. The Parsons were working in a community rich in the understanding of this topic.

**Emily** So in this deep field of nurseries, what did success look like for the Parsons brothers? I understand brother William passed away in 1856, leaving Robert Bowne Parsons and Samuel Bowne Parsons Sr. to run the nursery, and then they dissolved their partnership around 1872 and started their own nurseries near each other.

**David** Yes - Robert opened Robert B. Parsons & Co. Nurseries, Trees & Plants, and Samuel established the nursery in what is now Kissena Park, named Kissena Nurseries, Trees & Plants, Parsons & Sons Co. He was able to acquire a great number of exotic trees and shrubs including white mulberries. In fact, Samuel B Parsons Sr imported 25,000 of these trees and even today you can find many white mulberries across New York City, including my backyard by the way. I encourage you to look out for their berries every spring.

**Emily** What a great way to connect to the past. And Kissena Park is so beautiful - in the northern “Historic Grove” section of the park, there are even some trees from the Parsons’ nurseries still there today.

**David** And Samuel B Parsons Sr also brought the first European Weeping Beech tree from Belgium to America in 1847. This tree not only provided the cuttings for many, if not all, of the weeping beeches in America, but also survived in Flushing until 1998. Today, several sister trees of the original Weeping Beech can be visited in Weeping Beech Park, just a short walk from the Bowne House property.

**Emily** So what were these trees used for then?

**David** Well they were sold for a variety of gardens, but notably the Parsons nursery provided trees for Central Park and Prospect Park. This connected Samuel B Parsons Jr. to the two designers of Central Park, Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux. The nursery imported trees to fulfill their picturesque design. This led to Samuel becoming Calvert’s apprentice and eventually partner in 1887. In 1905, Samuel became the Parks Commissioner of New York. Unfortunately, Samuel B Parsons Jr. is also connected to the great loss of American Chestnuts. He had imported Japanese Chestnuts and sold them across America, but unbeknownst to him these trees carried a fungus that caused chestnut blight. This has resulted in the devastation of the American Chestnut tree. Despite this one accidental error, Samuel B Parsons Jr. was an essential part of the history of landscape architecture in America and helped found the American Society of Landscape Architects. We still have trees growing at the Bowne House that were imported for their nursery, including a large Japanese Maple that we are particularly proud of.

**Emily** And those are the contributions we must remember him for. Thank you again, David. To learn more, please visit our website [www.bownehouse.org](http://www.bownehouse.org). There you can read about Horticulture under our “BH From Home” tab; or see the grounds for yourself by booking an appointment on our website. Thank you again for joining us.