

Transcript of "The Quaker Cross Garden"

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. For our next few meetings we will discuss horticulture. Growing plants would have been a major part of the lives of Bowne House residents even before it became the family business in the mid 19th century. There is so much to delve into for this topic and I am excited to get started. Today's podcast will serve as an introduction to the founder of the family's tree nursery, Samuel Parsons and how the family's Quaker morals connect to horticulture.

David So if you are listening to the audio only version of our discussion, we encourage you to watch the video on our website. There you can see the visuals we talk about.

Emily Great, so to start us off, who was Samuel Parsons?

David Samuel Parsons was born in Manhattan in 1771, but moved to Flushing when he married Mary Bowne in 1806. They lived together near the Bowne House and had eight children. He was a farmer so his children would have been quite helpful completing all of that work. He also ministered with the Society of Friends and was a prominent member of the Quaker community in Flushing. These parts of his life overlapped when he set out to start a tree and shrub nursery. He wrote about his intentions in his journal in April 1837. His writing is abbreviated, but it provides insight into his thought process.

"10th. 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.

11th and 12th. Engaged in setting out trees in the village.

13th. At [Quaker] Meeting spoke on the words: 'the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof,' much opened on the Divine beauty: in the tree business.

14th and 15th. Setting out trees.

22nd. Steadily engaged, too much pressure of worldly concerns.

29th. Much engaged in nursery business."

Emily Ah, it sounds like a tactic to keep the family close to home, his sons out of trouble, and to have his sons follow in his footsteps.

David It is exactly that. Samuel hoped that his sons would continue on growing trees in Flushing rather than head to Manhattan for work. Despite being born in Manhattan, it seems his preference for Flushing was due to his strong Quaker preference for a simple life that the country would provide. On the 13th of April he spoke about Psalm 24 at a Quaker meeting and through that bible verse he made a clear connection between his faith and the nursery. By working the earth and growing trees, Samuel and his sons would be connected to the Lord.

We learn more about his moral concerns as he wrote on the 22nd that he was experiencing too much pressure from worldly concerns. To me, it seems that these worldly concerns are exactly what he wanted his sons to avoid by staying in Flushing. This aligns well with Quaker philosophy as the founders encouraged everyone to garden and be connected to nature. So as our series on horticulture continues, especially as we discuss the Parsons' Nursery, we must keep in mind this moral impetus for the company.

Emily But the Bowne House has another example of this blending of Quaker morals with horticulture. Right next to the house there is a garden designed after a Quaker cross necklace owned by John Bowne's daughter-in-law, Mary Beckett.

David This "cross" is made up of curves rather than angles. I would describe it as two figure eights overlapping with two additional semi-circles on each side.

Emily Unfortunately, we do not know *when* the garden version of this design was first implemented at the house, but the layout was maintained as it became a museum. The garden used to be filled with a wide variety of flowers including roses, tulips, lilies, crocuses, lilacs and violets. And we do know that the House always had a strong connection to horticulture - from its beginnings in 1661 as a farm, and then especially in the 19th Century, when the House was surrounded by carefully procured species of plants from around the world, due to the efforts of the Parsons brothers for their nursery businesses.

David Yes - and it certainly seems that Samuel Parsons' vision for his sons was quite successful. I think his granddaughter Bertha Parsons sums it up well - in 1940 she wrote "To me the words that Grandpa wrote in his Journal are most significant; he evidently accomplished his cherished aim, for his three sons who lived to old age developed strong bodies. I know that my Father lived, as did his Father, in the heart of the true spirit and beauty of Nature, realizing that the earth was, and is,

the Lord's, not ours to destroy or mar - a trust."

Emily That is remarkable. And we still have the Bowne House and its lovely environs to enjoy today. We will be discussing more about this topic in future podcasts, and to learn more please visit our website www.bownehouse.org, and read about Horticulture under our "BH From Home" tab; or see the grounds for yourself and come visit us by booking an appointment on our website. Thank you again for joining us.

Cited Text

- "A Famous Nursery of Old Flushing: Some Personal Recollections of Miss Bertha R. Parsons." *The Flushing Garden Club, Inc.* (1940): 1-3.