

## Transcript of "The Underground Railroad Letters of Bowne House Residents"

**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 concerns some letters received by Bowne House residents. These letters provide direct evidence of Bowne family participation in the Underground Railroad. We are quite pleased to be able to share these rare letters with you, so let's begin by discussing why they are historically significant. David, can you give us some background on these letters?

**David** Yes, Thank you Emily. These two letters make clear the involvement of Bowne House residents in anti-slavery activism. These letters add greatly to our understanding of the ways in which Bowne House residents were connected with other activists and involved in anti-slavery organizations.

The first letter I would like to read was sent by William Harned, a Quaker from Brooklyn who was the treasurer of the New York Vigilance Committee to Robert Bowne Parsons. Robert was the son of Samuel Parsons and Mary Bowne Parsons, and he was living in the Bowne House at this time with his siblings and aunts. This letter is dated July 28, 1849.

*"Esteemed friend,*

*Our Vigilance Committee must have money, or give up our business. In our emergency, we are under a necessity of employing every lawful & honorable means of raising funds. We have concluded to send out our friend Robert Edmund, of whom we hear a good report, to make an appeal in our behalf to all who have a heart to sympathize with the slave. Chas [Charles] B. Ray & I have concluded to let him commence among your villagers. Will you not give him all the "aid & comfort" you can? And see that he is put on the track of every one who will be likely to sympathize with the object of his mission? In laboring in your vicinity, I shall request him to deposit any surplus funds he may collect with you. You will, I hope, be able to counsel him as to his operations in adjacent towns & neighborhoods.*

*Yours truly, but in mine Haste Will Harned"*

To provide some context about this letter, the New York Vigilance Committee led various anti-slavery efforts including assisting people escaping slavery and raising

funds to cover the legal defenses of those in need. It is clear from this letter that Robert B. Parsons was directly involved in these efforts.

**Emily** It sounds like they trusted Robert and he was already well established as closely connected to the abolitionists throughout Queens.

**David** Yes, this suggests he was quite involved in the New York Vigilance Committee. Charles B. Ray, mentioned in the letter, was a famous African-American newspaper editor, an officer to the New York Vigilance Committee and a minister who held gatherings of anti-slavery activists in his home.

The second letter I would like to read for us was sent by Simeon Jocelyn to William Bowne Parsons, who was the younger brother of Robert Bowne Parsons. This letter is dated September 28, 1850. Simeon Jocelyn was the Vice-President of the New York Vigilance Committee and a minister to a predominantly Black congregation in Williamsburg. The letter reads,

*“Dear Sir,*

*I commend unto thee this colored brother, who will tell you so much of his story as is necessary to guide your action for his welfare. Williamsburgh is too near the city for his safety. If he can be kept for a few days perfectly unobserved in your neighborhood, he may after the hunters shall have returned take passage east or north as may be deemed advisable. This is a strong case and great care and caution is required. Having received injury in my arm by railroad accident, I am dependent on my daughter to write this letter.”*

*Truly yours, S.S. Jocelyn”*

**Emily** This letter is even more direct. They are definitely discussing the Underground Railroad.

**David** It is quite amazing, especially considering that this letter is dated just ten days after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which strengthened the goals of a similar Act from 1793. Both of these Acts made it illegal to assist anyone escaping slavery even in free states, so the actions written in this letter would have been dangerous for everyone involved. Normally, this type of correspondence would have been burned so as to not leave any evidence. We cannot know why this particular letter was saved, but as historians we must be grateful.

**Emily** I certainly am. If you would like to learn more about this topic, we encourage you to

read a new article written by Bowne House Archivist Charlotte Jackson and Collections Volunteer Ellen Spindler, about Bowne House residents' involvement in the New York Underground Railroad network. A direct link to the article can be found right below this video. And please visit our website [www.bownehouse.org](http://www.bownehouse.org) to stay up to date on all our latest research and content. Thank you again for joining us.