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Samuel Parsons (1751–1820): A Virginian Quaker in Revolutionary Times

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During the American War of Independence, the Virginia Yearly Meeting declared that for members to be in unity with the Society, they must free the people they held in bondage. A number of factors contributed to Virginian Friends taking longer than others to ban slavery among their membership. They lived in the wealthiest state; the state with about 40 per cent of the enslaved people in the union. Quakers shared in that wealth. Virginian Friends called for members to free enslaved people while it was illegal in Virginia to do so. The economic and family lives of Friends would be transformed. Few Virginian Quakers achieved historic prominence as antislavery leaders. That is not to say they didn't achieve some notoriety in their lifetimes. A look at Quaker, Samuel Parsons, gives indications that the actions of devoted Quakers had ripple effects in spreading freedom and the hope for freedom. Quakers voiced support for the natural rights of people they had inherited, then freed. If the hope for freedom rippled through Parsons' community with a surge of manumissions in the 1780s, by 1800, those hopes were fading.

Introduction

Samuel Parsons has a faint historic footprint. A marker in front of his son's home, the Samuel Pleasants Parsons House, states, 'The Parsons family was part of a network of important Richmond Quaker families that were collectively involved in a series of abolition and prison reform activities.' While the son is noted for his role in shaping the Virginia State Penitentiary, the father is not well documented. Samuel Parsons went from farming to milling to merchant, with his commitment to his Quaker faith a constant. His role as an abolitionist must be teased out of details contained in meeting minutes, deeds, and court records.

The Virginia Yearly Meeting lagged others in adopting antislavery positions. Finally, during the time of the American War of Independence, they forbade members from holding people in bondage. The enslavers among them either freed the people they held in bondage or left the faith. The effects of this transformation rippled through their lives and communities. Samuel Parson freed enslaved people he inherited during that window of expanding freedoms.

The American War of Independence, known in America as The Revolutionary War, by words and deeds, stoked hopes of freedom. By the end of the War, in 1782, the Virginia Assembly lifted a ban on freeing enslaved people that had been in place for 60 years. A rush of manumissions followed. In the decades following, the State legislated a series of restrictions on private manumissions and liberties of Black people. The rush of manumissions slowed. Defiant and determined to secure freedom, hundreds of men, led by an enslaved blacksmith named Gabriel, planned an uprising in 1800. The plot was betrayed. Trial testimony revealed a conspiracy to set fire to tobacco warehouses, fight white men with makeshift swords, seize the militia's guns, kidnap Governor James Monroe, and inspire a revolution of liberation. After 1800, hopes for abolition faded as did Quaker presence in Virginia.

Few scholars illuminate the lives of colonial and revolutionary era Quakers in Virginia. Most often Virginian Quakers appear as minor characters in accounts of visiting Quakers, with focus on the leadership of Philadelphia and London. In contrast, independent Quaker scholar, Jay Worrall, Jr.'s 1994 book, *The Friendly Virginians: America's First Quakers*,[1] presents a broad history from 1655 into the twentieth century. Worrall traces abolition as one thread of Quaker history. *Southern Quakers and Slavery: A Study in Institutional History*[2] by Stephen Weeks first published in 1896, is still cited today. Weeks emphasises Virginia and North Carolina law, Society discipline, and

[1] Worrall, J., *The Friendly Virginians: America's First Quakers*, Athens, Georgia: Iberian Publishing Company, 1994.

[2] Weeks, S. B., *Southern Quakers and Slavery: A Study in Institutional History*, repr. Kessinger Publishing, Baltimore, Md. John Hopkins Press, 1896).

Society history, including the southern Quakers' exodus to newly established free states, particularly Ohio, after 1800.

Michael L. Nicholls' 2012 *Whispers of Rebellion: Narrating Gabriel's Conspiracy*[3] is a detailed account of the physical setting and residents most affected by the uprising. His inductive approach roots the rebels in their communities. Douglas Egerton's 1993 deeply analytical, even speculative, book, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802,*[4] describes Gabriel as ideologically aligned with urban artisans, anticipating overcoming a struggle with the large merchant class of Richmond, Virginia. James Sidbury's work, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730–1810,*[5] traces the development of race consciousness, symbolic resonance of elements of the rebellion, and the social milieu of Richmond. Despite noting that the conspirators were to spare Quakers, Methodists, and Frenchmen (all of whom were thought to be sympathetic to freedom), none of the three authors explore the fact that Quakers lived among the conspirators and were transforming the lives of enslaved families by manumissions and education in the decades leading up to the attempt to overthrow slavery. The authors emphasise other ideological and circumstantial factors that inspired the conspiracy.

Recent academic interest in The Religious Society of Friends transforming into an abolitionist faith is reflected in conferences, writings, and databases. Byrcchan Carey and Geoffrey Plank edited a collection of essays from a 2014 conference, *Quakers and Abolition.*[6] As they stated in the introduction, 'There are a number of reasons why the Quakers' engagement with slavery needs more scholarly attention. The old celebratory literature concentrating on antislavery heroes still distracts many of us from the complexities of the Quaker response to slavery'. While firmly rooted in the reality that there were enslavers among Quakers until the late-eighteenth century, the collection does not address the conundrum of the Virginia Quakers who were forbidden by law from freeing enslaved people they inherited until 1782. Samuel Parsons is an example of a Quaker who did not emerge as an 'antislavery hero,' but who devoted his life to implementing Quaker antislavery positions.

William Fernadez Hardin presents significant research on Quaker antislavery hero Robert Pleasants in articles, a dissertation, and encyclopaedia entries. Pleasants took a multipronged approach to promoting abolition, including suing to free the people his

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[3] Nicholls, M. L. *Whispers of Rebellion: Narrating Gabriel's Conspiracy*. Virginia. University of Virginia Press. 2012.

[4] Egerton, D., Gabriel's *Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802*, North Carolina.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

[5] Sidbury, J., *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730–1810*, Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

[6] Carey, B. and Plank, G., eds., Quakers and Abolition, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2013, p. 7.

father had bequeathed in trust. Pleasants' life illustrates the same time and region as Parsons, but, in contrast, Samuel Parsons was not an activist. He was not a member of the elite. He did not leave behind diaries, letters, and essays that reveal his thoughts on slavery. Pleasants freed hundreds of people, Parsons about a dozen.

My approach is inductive. I trace Samuel Parsons' family and associates. In doing so, I demonstrate the deep connections that Quakers, and, by implication, the people they enslaved, had throughout the network of people touched by Gabriel's Conspiracy. I used deeds, wills, minutes, and land records to place Parsons in context of where he lived, who he worshipped with, his family, the people he inherited, and to consider these details in light of Virginia's slavery laws, Quaker policies, and historic events. What emerges is a man who inherited enslaved people from his Quaker father and spent decades working to meet his commitments to his faith, his family, and the people he freed. In doing so, perhaps sparking the hope for freedom among others.

Section 1: Where Samuel was a child, 1751–1764

Samuel grew up on a 250 acre[7] plantation about 9 miles up Brook Road from Richmond, Virginia. Richmond was Henrico's new County seat, not yet the state capital. It was a busy shipping hub at the falls of the James River. The Parsons' closest Quaker meeting for worship was The Swamp, north over the Chickahominy River. Samuel's parents, Joseph and Susanna, were married at the more established White Oak Swamp Meeting House, about 20 miles east. Susanna travelled there regularly to represent The Swamp at the Women's Monthly Meetings. Bits of information from an estate inventory hint that the Parsons grew wheat and tobacco; raised some livestock; and harvested timber. With fewer than ten enslaved labourers, some of them children, the Parsons probably participated in farm work. In March 1763, when Samuel was about 12, his father expanded the plantation, buying 230 additional acres.[8]

Five months later, Joseph wrote his will,[9] leaving Samuel 480 acres, half of which he would control when he turned 21, the other half after Susanna's widowhood ended. The tracts were near the current day I-95 and I-295 intersection. By the standards of the day, 480 acres was a middling sized plantation.

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[7] Davis, V. L. H. and Williams, G. M. eds., *Henrico County Virginia Deed 1750–1774*, Westminister Md.: Heritage Books, 2007, p. 1; Weisiger, B. B, ed., *Henrico County Virginia Colonial Deeds 1737–1750*, repr. 1995, Athens, Ga.: Iberian Publishing Company, 1985, p. 75.

[8] Davis, *Henrico Deeds* 1750–1774, p. 114.

[9] Miscellaneous Wills of Virginia, 1675–1884; Brook Collection (BR Box 221 177/379) The Huntington Library, San Marino California, via Ancestry.com. accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/62347/images/007643788_00177?pId=2126869.

Susanna Woody Parsons was Joseph's second wife; the first, Sarah Woodson, had married him about 1717;[10] Susanna in 1750.[11] According to Joseph's will, he had five children; the first three, Agnes, Elizabeth, and Joseph Jr., were adults when Joseph died. Susanna's children, Samuel and Judith, were minors.

Joseph Parsons Sr. marriages and children	
M1 Susan Woodson est m 1717	**M2 Susanna Woody m 1750**
Children:	**Children:**
Agnes Parsons	Samuel Parsons
Elizabeth Parsons	Judith Parsons
Joseph Parsons, Jr.	

Table 1.

Samuel, the second son, was the primary beneficiary of his father's will. Before remarrying, Joseph had gifted his first son, Joseph Jr., 464 acres[12] of land that he had owned for over 30 years.[13] Deeds referred to that property as 'near Half Sink' and 'bound by Turner's Run' that is, also near the I-95 and I-295 intersection.

In his will, Joseph 'lent' Susanna the 250 acres that he bought in 1749, just before their marriage. Additionally, he bequeathed her Mille, and lent, during her widowhood, Abraham, Jemmie, Tobia, Isam, Izac, Dulse, and Sarah. Susanna's children, Samuel and Judith, would inherit the enslaved people after their mother died or remarried.

Enslaved People in 1762 will Of Joseph Parsons
Mille
Abraham
Jemmie
Tobias
Isam
Izac
Dulse
Sarah

Table 2.

[10] Torrence, C., ed., *The Edward Pleasants Valentine Papers*, Richmond, Va.: Clearfield, 192 7, p. 1998.

[11] Monthly Meeting of Friends in Henrico County; The Record Book 1699–1757; p. 347. Accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2189/images/42483_1821100519_4136-00356?pId=1101783502.

[12] Weisiger, Henrico Deeds 1737–1750, p. 130.

[13] Torrence, Valentine Papers, p. 1886; acquiring 464 acres in 2 purchases; selling land in Goochland gifted to Sarah after marriage, p. 2006.

Joseph wrote a couple of caveats into his will. One, Susannah was to educate their children, as well as the enslaved children. Two, Joseph directed that the enslaved people not be sold during the distribution of his estate. Joseph Parsons wrote his will two decades before manumissions would be legalized in Virginia.

Joseph chose three Quakers as Executors, the first being Robert Pleasants. Robert Pleasants of Curles (1723–1801), was the 44-year-old son of the extremely wealthy John Pleasants (1697–1771) who owned thousands of acres, an international trading business, mills, taverns, orchards, and, by the end of his life, over 200 enslaved people. The Pleasants of Curles had been members of the Society of Friends since the late 1600s.[14]

In 1757, with John Woolman in attendance, the Virginia Yearly Meeting adopted the Philadelphia Queries opposing buying and selling people, but Virginians tweaked the language to allow buying enslaved people for one's own use. The query also set the expectation to 'use those well which they are possessed of by inheritance'[15] and to give them religious education. In 1764, the Yearly Meeting directed care and concern for the clothing, education, food, state, and station for people held in bondage. Colonial yearly meetings eventually reached consensus on prohibiting Quakers from buying as well as selling people.[16] Virginia Friends arrived at that position in 1772.[17] Joseph's will was in concert with Quaker prohibitions on selling enslaved people. He entrusted his estate to Robert Pleasants who would become a leader in antislavery activism.

Section 2. Samuel's teenage years 1764–1770

At age 14, Samuel Parsons could choose his own guardian. In 1765, he chose Robert Pleasants.[18] As a minor with a deceased father and an inheritance, Samuel was required to have a guardian to manage his assets and make financial reports to the county.

Meanwhile, Samuel had new neighbours. Directly south, Thomas Prosser began piecing together a two-thousand-acre plantation from tracts inherited and purchased.[19] The Prosser property was between the Parsons and Picquinoque, where family members of two of Robert Pleasants' Quaker second cousins, John and Joseph,

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[14] Hardin, W. I., *Litigating the Lash: Quaker Emancipator Robert Pleasants, The Law of Slavery, and the Meaning of Manumission in Revolutionary and Early National Virginia*, Nashville, Tn.: Vanderbilt University, 2013.

[15] Virginia Yearly Meeting Minutes 1757. Transcribed, p. 95. Accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2189/images/42483_1821100519_4081-00095?pId=1101783502.

[16] Drake, T. E., *Quakers and Slavery in America*; Glouster Ma USA; Yale University Press; 1950; 1965 repr. pp. 59–60.

[17] Virginia Yearly Meeting Minutes 1772. Transcribed p. 156. Accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2189/images/42483_1821100519_4081-00156?pId=1101783502.

[18] Henrico Order Book 1763–67; 7 October 1765, p 526, Library of Virginia; microfilm reel 68, image page 213/578.

[19] Henry Stokes, accessed 15 August 2025, https://www.werelate.org/wiki/Person:Henry_Stokes_(8); Davis, Henrico Deeds 1750–1774, p. 30.

settled on inherited land. The Pleasants' parcels are further described as being south of the Chickahominy Swamp at the mouth of Horse Creek. In 1765, Quaker Joshua Storrs bought 184 acres 'at a place called "Pickquanockeque,'' commonly known by the name of Locust Neck.'[20] Storrs married Susanna Pleasants, John's daughter. The neighbouring Owens family sold land to the Parsons and Prossers, and gifted tracts to their younger generations. Hobson Owen received 150 acres.[21] Prosser shared a property line, or was near neighbours with, at least six Quaker property owners, with more Quakers to the northwest who attended The Swamp Meeting.

One of the Pleasants cousins began hosting meetings for worship, and the Picquinoque Meeting was recognised as part of the Henrico Monthly Meeting. It was a small meeting, with Samuel's nuclear family, the Storrs, and several extended Pleasants families, about 3 dozen members.[22] Samuel's social circles were broader than the Quaker community. One indication being the number of deeds he witnessed for his neighbours, some of whom were illiterate.

Quakers, and the people they held in bondage, had occasions to associate with their neighbours. The county mandated participation in road and bridge repairs. Richmond had a market, and the courthouse, bringing people to town. Traditionally, enslaved people were released from work obligations late Saturday through Sunday, providing time for socialising, travel, worship, and trade. The enslaved people of Henrico had networks of familial and social ties; some were linked to white families' ties, some independent of that network.

Over time, the Prosser plantation, Brookfield, stood in contrast to Samuel's. The Prosser home was a five bay, two story building with wings. Brookfield had two outbuildings devoted to cloth manufacturing; a blacksmith shop; two barns; and housing for almost 60 enslaved people,[23] including Gabriel. In 1783, Samuel offered Level Green for sale, noting that 300 acres was 2/3 cleared, 'the plantation under tolerable repair, and includes 40 acres cultivated'. The house was 40' × 18', or 69 square metres, with a smoke house and free-standing kitchen; there were gardens, a woodlot, and orchards.[24] Level Green was modest in comparison to the Prossers'.

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[20] Davis, Henrico Deeds 1750–1774, p. 151.

[21] Davis, Henrico Deeds 1750–1774, p. 107.

[22] Hinshaw, W. W., *Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy*, Vol. VI, Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Co Inc, 1993, pp. 145–241; Henrico Monthly Meeting Minutes, 1757–1780, 1–160, accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2189/images/42483_1821100519_4111-00001?pld=1101783502.

[23] Henrico County Historical Society Website, accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.henricohistoricalsociety.org/lostarchitecture.brookfieldplantation.html.

[24] The Virginia Gazette, 13 September 1783 p.1, accessed 15 August 2025. https://newspapers.com/image/604845654/.

In addition to building a robust plantation, Prosser assumed prominent civic and business roles. He served as executor of several large estates. In 1772, he partnered with the Trents to buy a lot in Richmond near the old public tobacco warehouse; they described themselves as merchants.[25] During the American War of Independence, he brokered supplies and served briefly in the militia. After the war he helped recreate the county's deed and estate files.[26] He served as the Henrico High Sheriff and a magistrate. Prosser was a force in Henrico County, Virginia. Before moving there, he had been expelled from a Cumberland County, Virginia, seat in the House of Burgesses 'for antedating deeds to his own advantage and for packing a jury to assess lands he wished to purchase'.[27]

In 1767, when he was about 50 years old, Joseph Parsons, Jr., Samuel's older half-brother, deeded the 464 acres near Half Sink to his two oldest sons, William and Josiah.[28] In a separate deed, he named his nine children and transferred ownership of a specific enslaved person to each of them.[29]

Grantees in Joseph Parson's Jr 1767 deed	Enslaved person assigned
William Parsons	Abram
Sarah Parsons	Mima
Josiah Parsons	Stephen
Mary Parsons	Aggy
Ursula Parsons	Jenny
Elizabeth Parsons	Carter
Woodson Parsons	Moses
Agnes Parsons	Dooke
Judith Parsons	Isaac

Table 3.

A year later, Joseph's cousin, Stephen Woodson, made a bargain deed to benefit Joseph Parsons Jr.'s nine children. Stephen gave Woodson Parsons, the youngest son, one hundred acres at 'Piccanocqucy'. All the children would split the residue of the estate including twenty enslaved people.[30]

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[25] Davis, Henrico Deeds, 1750–1774, p. 240.

[26] Ward, H. M. and Greer, H. E., Richmond During the Revolution 1775–83, Charlottesville, Va: University Press of Virginia;1977; 94–96. *Henrico County Virginia Court Order Book No. 1 Part I 1 Oct 1781- 9 July 1783*, Athens, Ga.: Iberian Publishing Co, 2019.

[27] Pargellis, S. M. 'The Procedure of the Virginia House of Burgesses,' *The William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine* 7/3 (1927), pp. 144, accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1922239?seq=2.

[28] Davis, Henrico Deeds 1757–1774, p. 167.

[29] Davis, Henrico Deeds, 1757–1774, p. 167.

[30] Davis, Henrico Deeds, 1757–1774, p. 202.

There is a Joseph Parsons' estate inventory, dated 1769;[31] it lists nine enslaved people, as well as farm equipment and livestock. The Library of Virginia attributes this inventory to Joseph Parsons Sr., who died about seven years earlier. It may be the estate inventory of Joseph Parsons Jr. who died much closer to that date than his father did.

In 1769 Inventory of Joseph Parson's estate	description
Pompey	man
Sal	woman
Pat	Sal's child
Tobia	Sal's child
Rachel	woman
Milley	Rachel's child
Emmanuel	Rachel's child
Kate	Negro girl
Not named	Old negro woman

Table 4.

Joseph Jr.'s will appears to be missing. If the people from the inventory were also divided equally among Joseph Jr.'s children, each child would now hold four people in bondage. One term of Joseph Jr.'s will appears in a 1770 contract signed by Josiah, the second oldest son. 'Pursuant to his father's will', the contract bound Josiah as an apprentice to learn 'the art and mystery of building houses, and joinery'. He was bound to a carpenter in nearby Hanover County until he reached age 21.[32]

By 1771, Joseph Parsons, Jr.'s oldest daughter, Sarah, had died, leaving a will that distributed assets, including enslaved people, she had inherited from her father and Stephen Woodson among her eight remaining siblings.

Section 3. Samuel comes of age 1771–1778

In 1771, when he was about 20, Samuel was active in the Henrico Monthly Meeting. His first assignment was to attend the Quarterly Meeting.[33] Over the next 30 years, Samuel and Robert Pleasants attended many Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly Meetings together.

In 1772, Henrico Monthly Meeting made a request. The minutes noted that Samuel's nieces and nephews had no appointed guardian. Considering that Samuel lived nearby and as he was Executor of his brother's estate, the Meeting asked that he be

[31] Henrico County Miscellaneous Records, Vol 7, Library of Virginia, p. 2089.

[32] Davis, Henrico Deeds, 1750–1774, p. 198.

[33] Henrico Monthly Meeting, Minutes, 1757–1780, p 176. Accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2189/images/42483_1821100519_4111-00091?pId=1101783502.

the Guardian for the minor children.[34] At the same Monthly Meeting, Friends disowned Joseph Jr.'s second oldest daughter, Mary. She had married out of unity.

There are 1773–4 Guardian accounts for the three youngest children, Woodson, Agnes, and Judith. Samuel charged Woodson's account for clothing, a teacher, and boarding paid to Susanna Storrs. He charged the girls' estate accounts for 'maintenance' paid to Nathaniel Clarke.[35]

Woodson's expenses were paid, in part, with the proceeds from the hire of the boy Moses, whom his father had left him, and 'sundry Negroes' from his brother William's estate. Agnes and Judith were funded by the hire of Mima, her two children, a boy Isaac, and 'sundry Negroes' of William's estate. The report does not show to whom these people were hired, nor does it indicate what type of labour. This document is the earliest indication that the oldest of the nine siblings, William, had died and that the seven remaining siblings inherited the people he had owned.

Soon after, the Monthly Meeting made a second request of Samuel. The 'Picquinocy' Meeting needed an Overseer. When consulted, the members said they thought Samuel Parsons most proper. He accepted.[36]

In 1774, Samuel's sister, Judith, married the neighbour, Hobson Owen. She was disowned for marrying out of unity. Joshua Storrs delivered the letter of disunity.[37]

That same year, Samuel and his mother wrote to the Henrico Monthly Meeting seeking advice. They wanted to free the people they held in bondage, but as it was illegal to do so, they requested guidance.[38] The minutes noted that other Friends' minds were weighed down by the same consideration.

In 1775, the Henrico Monthly Meeting questioned Samuel's nephew Josiah about an act contrary to unity. He had bought an enslaved person from his brother's estate. Josiah explained that he bought the person for humanitarian reasons.[39] He maintained his standing as a Quaker until a couple of years later when he hired a man to enlist in the Continental Army in his place. Then he was disowned. Samuel's niece Ursula married out of unity. She was disowned. Niece Elizabeth married out of

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[34] Henrico Monthly Meeting Minutes, 1757–1780, p. 99, accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2189/images/42483_1821100519_4111-00099?pId=1101783502.

[35] Parsons, J., Guardian accounts for Woodson, Agnes and Judith Parsons, January 22, 1774, Misc Court Records, Vol 7, Reel 3, Richmond, Va.: Library of Virginia, pp. 2236–2238.

[36] Henrico Monthly Meeting Minutes 1757–1780, p. 103, accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2189/images/42483_1821100519_4111-00103?pId=1101783502.

[37] Henrico Monthly Meeting Minutes 1757–1780, p. 105, accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2189/images/42483_1821100519_4111-00105?pId=1101783502.

[38] Henrico Monthly Meeting Minutes 1757–1780, p. 110, accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2189/images/42483_1821100519_4111-00110?pId=1101783502.

[39] Hinshaw, Quaker Encyclopedia, vol VI, 201–202.

unity; disowned. Nephew Woodson enlisted in the Continental army; disowned. At The Swamp Particular Meeting, five of Micajah Woody's children were disowned for marrying out and enlisting.[40] At Picquinoque, at least 4 of the younger generation of Pleasants were disowned.

During the 1770s, three big issues dominated Virginia monthly meetings: young people marrying out of unity, pacifism, and slavery. The Virginia Yearly meetings focused on slavery and the impending war; Samuel was in those meetings. In 1776, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting invited the other five American Yearly Meetings to convene for the first time to discuss the Quaker response to the conflict with Britain. Samuel was one of seven representatives from Virginia.[41] He was 25 years old.

No doubt, some of the Quakers who enlisted to fight in the War of Independence were inspired by the patriot cause. Some who married out were motivated by love. Some rejected the sufferings and simplicity of a Quaker life. Others were avoiding the challenges of a livelihood not supported by unpaid labour. To quote Thomas E. Drake, 'Quaker planters without slaves could not survive in a region where slavery prevailed. For them it was a case of leaving either their Society or their plantation'.[42] The dynamic of the Quakers was playing out among the Parsons family. Samuel became increasingly involved in Friends' efforts to oppose slavery; simultaneously large numbers of young Quakers left the Society.

The Virginia Yearly Meeting attempted to reach consensus about prohibiting slavery among members. The topic was carried forward from year to year. They decided that Quakers must take a stance on changing the law. The Yearly Meeting encouraged Quakers to talk to lawmakers. Robert Pleasants was prominent in those efforts.

In 1776, Gabriel was born on the Prosser plantation. He and his brother Solomon were trained as blacksmiths. With nearly 60 people held in bondage, Thomas Prosser held one of the largest enslaved communities in Henrico County. Freedom was a cause of the day; whether the revolutionary rhetoric about natural rights and freedom applied to all people was unsettled. The year before, Patrick Henry had made his call to arms in Richmond, 'Give me liberty or give me death'. The sentiment endured through 1800 when witnesses at the conspiracy trials said that Gabriel intended to rally his followers under a silk flag emblazoned with, 'Death or Liberty'.

After years of debate, in 1779, the Virginia Yearly Meeting instructed Quakers to free enslaved adults. The Yearly asked Monthly Meetings to report back the next year who did and who did not comply:

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[40] Hinshaw, Quaker Encyclopedia, vol VI, p. 220.

[41] Worrall, J., *The Friendly Virginians*, p. 197.

[42] Drake, Quakers and Slavery, p. 82.

> We do therefore most earnestly recommend to all who continue to with hold from any their just right to freedom, as they prise their own present peace, and future happiness, to clear their hands of this inequity by executing manumissions for all those held by them in slavery[43]

These emancipations were not legally binding and not filed with the County. Meeting representatives checked if Quakers paid the people they had 'freed' for their work. As for the Quakers who continued to hold people in bondage, representatives visited them, sometimes repeatedly.

In 1779, the Virginia Yearly Meeting began to refer to 'members who have negros under their care', as distinguished from those held in bondage. Those 'under their care' may have been too young or infirm to be manumitted. While the term was not defined, it may also refer to formerly enslaved people who became the Quakers' employees or tenants. As beneficiary, Executor, and Guardian, Samuel had dozens of enslaved people 'under his care' over decades. Complying with both Quaker discipline and civil laws was not always a smooth path.

Section 4. Samuel starts his family 1779–1798

In 1779, at 28, Samuel married Sarah Pleasants.[44] She was Robert Pleasants' cousin, once removed, and the widow of Jacob Pleasants of Picquinoque. She came into the marriage with two sons, a daughter, and several inherited enslaved people.[45] Samuel's only sibling to sign the marriage certificate was his older half-sister, Agnes Woodson. The Henrico Meeting had appointed her as an elder two years prior.

The American War of Independence was ongoing. Norfolk was bombarded in 1776; in 1781, Richmond would be invaded. Quakers advised one another to be neutral in action and word. Whether it was their pacificism or their close ties with English business partners, Quakers were accused of not being loyal to the patriot cause. A few were confined. Many were fined. Some forcibly drafted. Some tortured for resisting enlistment. The War took a toll on Americans, with human, property, and business losses.[46]

Enslaved people found doors to freedom through the American War of Independence. The British offered freedom for runaways who joined their army. After the hostilities ended, Virginia passed a law to free enslaved men who fought with the patriots. Laws were passed to protect free Blacks' right to defend their freedom in court, resist kidnapping, and have their children be free. The talk of freedom and natural

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[43] Virginia Yearly Meeting Minutes 1779. 1672–1836, p.159, accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2189/images/42483_1821100519_4081-00159?pId=1101783502.

[44] Hinshaw, Quaker Encyclopedia, vol VI, p. 202.

[45] Torrence, Valentine Papers, pp. 2290–2299. Jacob Pleasants' will, pp. 1129–1130.

[46] Worrall, pp. 192–223.

rights, combined with legislative changes raised hopes for people held in bondage and their advocates. Quakers became a force in those rising expectations.

During the war, Robert Pleasants set up people he inherited on a 350-acre plantation, Gravelly Hill, a few miles from his home. A plantation with 80 Black people living with liberties of free people caught the attention of a neighbour whose letters of complaint survive.[47] Early in 1782, Robert was charged with 'letting his Negroes go at large as freemen'.[48] Samuel Parsons was brought to court on the same charge. Both Parsons and Pleasants faced a grand jury that let the cases proceed.[49]

Samuel's plantation was about 600 acres. He had expanded his holdings by 160 acres, in 1777.[50] Were the people he and his wife inherited living in quasi-liberty just to the north of the Prosser plantation? As Woodson's guardian (up to 1783), Samuel was responsible for managing Woodson's 100 acres at Picquinoque and the people Woodson inherited. Were enslaved people living in a similar state just south of Prosser as well?

Both Pleasants and Parsons requested a jury trial instead of being judged by the magistrates, who in addition to Thomas Prosser, included Isaac Younghusband (a non-Quaker in an acrimonious marriage with Robert Pleasants' cousin), William Foushee (who enslaved 10 people in 1787); Nathaniel Wilkinson (who lived beside Prosser's Brookfield and enslaved about 50 people).[51]

Robert was convicted of allowing enslaved people to 'go at large as freemen'. He paid a fine and appealed.[52] Samuel was acquitted.[53] These cases, tried in Richmond, spread out over months and involved dozens of people.

The Parsons and Prosser families lived among many Quakers. Joshua Storrs died during the war and instructed his Executors that his two enslaved men should live with as much liberty as possible. His widow, Susanna, inherited eight enslaved people from her father, John Pleasants of Picquinoque, who bequeathed about 35 enslaved people among his children, some of whom were still Quakers.

Among Prosser's non-Quaker neighbours were several who had been raised as Friends, including Woodson Parsons and Judith Parsons Owens. To the near north and west, there were more Quakers: Bells, Johnsons, Woodys, and more Parsons. The older meetings, Curles and White Oak Swamp were twenty miles to the east and included some of the wealthiest of Henrico County's Quakers. Gabriel and the other people held

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47 Hardin, *Litigating the Lash*, pp. 87–88.

48 *Henrico County Virginia Court Order Book No. 1 Part I 1 Oct 1781- 9 July 1783*, Athens, Ga.: Iberian Publishing Co, 2019, p. 19.

49 Henrico Order Book Oct 1781–1783, p. 19.

50 Davis, Henrico Deeds 1750–1774, p. 239.

51 Henrico Order Book Oct 1781–1783, pp. 50–51.

52 Henrico Order Book Oct 1781–1783, p. 50.

53 Henrico Order Book 1781–1783, p. 70.

in bondage on Prosser's Brookfield had white neighbours who professed natural rights for all people, as well as enslaved neighbours who learned to read and were living under quasi-freedom because of Quakers.

Before the Treaty of Paris was signed, a manumission bill came before the Virginia Assembly. Quakers Warner Mifflin and John Parrish came from Delaware and Philadelphia to lobby alongside Virginian Edward Stabler. During the session, Mifflin and Parrish stayed three nights at Parsons' place. In June, after two weeks of the Quaker lobbyists' close watch, the Assembly passed the Virginia Manumission Act of 1782, making it legal to free enslaved men over twenty-one and women over 18.[54] There was a surge of manumissions. Enslaved family members, divided by gift deeds and wills among Quaker and non-Quaker siblings, found their status of free or enslaved linked to the religious affiliation of the beneficiary to whom they were assigned.

In Henrico, Robert Pleasants freed 78 people, more in the following years. The County Court assigned Isaac Younghusband to assess whether the enslave people Pleasants proposed for manumission qualified. That is, could they support themselves and were they old enough, but not too old?

Samuel Parsons freed nine people. Five of the nine were under the age of full manumission and would remain under Parsons' 'care' until they were old enough to be freed.[55] The court assigned Thomas Prosser to assess the people Parsons intended to free.

In Samuel Parson's 1782 deed	Birth year	Year to be free
Charles	1758	1782
Bidey	1750	1782
Nancy	1760	1782
Makey	1762	1782
Tabitha	1771	1789
Joe	1779	1800
Harry	1781	1802
Frank	1780	1801
Charles	1782	1803

Table 5.

Also in Henrico County, Quaker William Binford freed 18 people. Non-Quaker Joseph Mayo, Jr, freed about 150. Others freed one, two or a handful of people.

[54] Nash, G. B., McDowell, M. R., and Parrish, J., 'Notes on a Journey to Virginia', *Quaker History*, 1 (2022), pp. 1–50; Nash, G. B., *Warner Mifflin: Unflinching Quaker Abolitionist*, Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, pp. 122–123.

[55] Charles; etc., Deed of Emancipation, 1782, *Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection*, Richmond, Va.: Library of Virginia, accessed 15 August 2025. https://rosetta.virginiamemory.com/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE3663320.

As Samuel traversed the maze of slave laws, had Prosser become the face of enforcement? According to the Manumission Act, Prosser, as High Sheriff for Henrico County, could seize free Black people who had not paid taxes and hire them out. In a separate new law, he could pick up 'slaves at large' and offer them for sale. He was assigned responsibility for repairing the causeway at Meadow Bridge and could requisition labourers from nearby property owners. Did Prosser have a hand in the charges against Parsons and Pleasants? Parsons must have considered that.

Gabriel was about six years old during the trials. He and his brothers lived with dozens of people who had little hope that Prosser would free them. Across Virginia, Black peoples' lives were changing—some freed, some promised freedom, some with family freed. News of these disparate fates would be shared, whether that was at Sunday gatherings, road work assignments, or market days.

After the trials, Samuel put his property up for sale and moved 30 miles west to Goochland County.[56] The Parsons joined the Genito meeting, part of the Cedar Creek Monthly Meeting.[57] Samuel continued to attend Quarterly and Yearly Meetings. He bought a 500-acre tract of land.[58] The 1787 personal property tax list shows 15 Black children, under age 16, living there; the number of Black adults was obscured by a tear in the original census paper.[59] Samuel, with several others, signed a deed as trustees for a half-acre tract for a school.[60] Several of his neighbours were Pleasants, a few also recently relocated from Henrico County.

In 1792, Sarah Parsons, with the children from her first marriage, freed a 43-year-old woman named Silvie along with eight other adults and children.[61] Was this the same Silvie Sarah's father left to her when she was a minor, over 25 years earlier?[62] Had she waited for her own children to come of age to ratify the emancipation of people inherited from her first husband 15 years earlier? Sarah's daughter, Elizabeth T. Pleasants, was widowed when she wrote a 1794 deed emancipating Cupid Dean;[63] had Cupid come to Elizabeth through her husband?

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[56] The Virginia Gazette, Saturday, September 13, 1783, p. 1, accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.newspapers.com/image/604845654/.

[57] Hinshaw, Quaker Encyclopedia, vol VI, p. 262.

[58] Sparacio, R. and Sparacio, S., eds., *Goochland County, Virginia Land Tax Books 1782–1788*, Berwyn Heights, Md.: Heritage Books, Inc, 1997, p. 38.

[59] Schreiner-Yantis and Speakman Love, F. S., eds., 'The 1787 *Census of Virginia*; Goochland County; Personal Tax Lists, 1787 Census of Virginia, Springfield Va.: Genealogical Books in Print, 1987, pp. 784–805; 797.

[60] Torrence, Valentine Papers, vol. II, p. 989.

[61] 1792 – Parsons, et al to Silvia, et *al – Goochland Co, Va Manumission Project*, Lynchburg, Va.: Liberty University, accessed 2 August 2025. https://manumissionproject.omeka.net/items/show/1534.

[62] Torrence, Valentine Papers, p. 1114.

[63] 1794 – Pleasants to Cupide – Goochland Co, VA, *Manumission Project*, Lynchburg, Va.: Liberty University, accessed April 2, 2025, https://manumissionproject.omeka.net/items/show/1539.

Pleasants in Goochland emancipated several dozen people. Thomas Pleasants held over 29 emancipated minors 'in his care'. Within 15 years, the Overseers of the Poor had bound 14 'free negro children' to Thomas Pleasants, being either minors he had freed, or the children of people he had freed.[64] Former enslavers did not sever all responsibility with a manumission deed, especially for children.

In 1803, Joseph Foster released 'all future demands of service a mulatto girl called Nancy White, alias Nancy Lewis, emancipated by deed recorded in Goochland County Court, the servant of whose service I purchased from Samuel Parsons'.[65] Sarah Parsons emancipated nine-year-old Nancy White in 1794; nine years later, Nancy was freed from bound service. The surname Foster is not among the Quakers appearing in the Cedar Creek Monthly Meeting. The release does not state how long the service contract had bound Nancy White or for what type of labour.

In 1774, the Parsons' guardian report showed the income from enslaved minors' labour supporting the Parsons children. Were circumstances any different, over 20 years later, for children who were freed, but contracted out pending their majority?

In Sarah Parson & kids' 1794 deed	Birth Year	Year to be free
Syliva	1749	1794
Phill	1774	1795
Bob	1775	1796
Ned	1782	1803
Pat	1784	1805
Nancy White	1785	1803
James White	1787	1805
Lucy White	1789	1807
Henry Ned	1790	1811

Table 6.

In Elizabeth T. Pleasant's 1994 deed	Birth year	Year to be free
Cupid Dean	1780	1801

Table 7.

[64] Free African Americans in Colonial Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland, and Delaware, Henrico County, accessed 15 August 2025, https://freeafricanamericans.com/virginiafreeafter1782.htm.

[65] White, Nancy alias: Nancy Lewis: Deed of Emancipation, 1803, *Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection*, Richmond, Va.: Library of Virginia. Accessed 15 August 2025. https://rosetta.virginiamemory.com/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE3664018.

Section 5. Samuel moves to Richmond 1799

In 1799, after fifteen years in Goochland, Samuel and his family returned to Henrico. They joined the new Richmond Quaker Meeting.[66] Samuel partnered with Joseph Anthony and Thomas Ladd, to rehabilitate and run a merchant mill.[67]

The James River Company Canal had reached Richmond, allowing shipments from above the fall line to be barged into the city. Samuel bought three half-acre lots close to the turn basin, using part of one to build a house, on others an office, warehouse, and storefront. He offered warehouse space for flour and grain. He offered 'extraordinary wages' for an employee of good moral character to build Windsor Chairs. He brokered for a manufacturer specialising in hardware for farming and milling.[68] In addition to his business interests, he became an overseer of the Richmond Meeting. He still had freed minors in his care, pending their coming of age.

According to Sidbury, Richmond, Virginia, was a boom town,[69] small and rough by the standards of northern American cities. The population had increased fivefold since Samuel left to 5000. It was the centre of Virginia's political and economic life. Merchants dealt in tobacco, wheat, coal, and luxury imports. Enslaved people were sold in public auctions in front of inns and taverns. The town was an unpaved construction zone, going from dusty to muddy and back again. Three story brick buildings were rising from the ashes of a wood town that had recently burnt.

Of the 5000 inhabitants, half were white. Among the non-white population, 20% were free, 80% enslaved. People filled the streets and docks. Free or enslaved, working people came and went. Rurally based enslaved labourers worked in the city under year-long contracts, living independently in boarding houses. Sailors and merchants arrived from the ocean; enslaved watermen arrived from the Piedmont plantations. Politicians came for business at the capitol; the courthouse attracted locals. Lodgings were rough for all but the wealthy, with dozens of bed frames crammed into humid rooms. There were plenty of places to eat, drink, sleep, gamble, and carouse. The town was a hotbed of politics. The degree of national control over states was in play, as was the status of slavery.

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[66] Hinshaw, Quaker Encyclopedia, VI, p. 262.

[67] Anthony, H., *Joseph Anthony 1767–1833: Virginian Quaker in Time of Calamity*, Charlottesville, Va.: Jefferson-Madison Regional Library, 2022, accessed 15 August 2025 https://dp.la/item/612a40f4e8d73df313d59d1c327465aa.

[68] *Virginia Argus*, January 24, 1806, accessed 16 August 2025. https://www.newspapers.com/article/virginia-argus-merch/165071307/; February 3, 1801. Accessed 16 August 2025. https://www.newspapers.com/article/virginia-argus-samparsons-1801/164706474/.

[69] Sidbury, J., *Ploughshares into Swords*; Ward, H. M., and Greer, H. E., *Richmond During the Revolution 1775–83*, Charlottesville, Va.: The University Press of Virginia, 1977.

Several of Samuel Parsons' former neighbours from the Brook had property or worked in Richmond—Storrs, Mosbys, Prosser, Pleasants, Owens. Thomas Prosser had died a couple of years earlier. His 23-year-old son, Thomas Henry Prosser, had inherited the plantation, town property, and about 55 people, including Gabriel and his brothers. Gabriel was a 23-year-old literate blacksmith, tried that year for biting off the ear of a white neighbour.

There were other deaths in the old neighbourhood. Samuel's nephew, Woodson Parsons had died in 1797. His will contrasts those of his richer relatives.[70] Generally, the first listed 'Item' would bequeath the oldest son real estate and provide for a widow. In Woodson's will, the first Item directed his executors to sell 'my man Moses' and use the proceeds to settle his debts. He gave directions to raise a blaze colt to 4 years of age, then sell the horse for the benefit of the children. Other assets he referred to in bulk and left to his widow, Anne Parsons. If he held on to the land Stephen Woodson gave him, that would include the one hundred acre parcel, just south of the Prossers, in Picquinocque.

Samuel's sister, Judith was widowed. Her husband, Hobson Owen, had died in 1796. Hobson left over 300 acres, some adjacent to the Prossers.

In 1778, The Henrico Monthly Meeting had combined The Swamp and Picquinoque Meetings into Beaverdam Meeting.[71] Quaker numbers were on the decline throughout Upper Quarterly Meeting. The momentum of Quaker antislavery actions shifted. Quakers holding people in bondage were disowned in 1788; with exceptions for enslaved people 'in the care of', most of whom were minors or elders. The number of free Black people in Virginia had grown to 20,000. Some freed people remained in bondage due to heirs not recognising their manumission, or kidnappers, or other failures. Quakers had actively pursued freedom suits to enforce the recognition of freed peoples' status. Robert Pleasants initiated the most extensive of freedom suits, suing his relatives to free hundreds of people, as directed by his father's will.

A law passed in 1796 to restrict Quakers' testifying in freedom suits on behalf of people held illegally. The House of Delegates tabled St. George Tucker's proposal to gradually eliminate slavery. Joseph Anthony reported to a national assembly of abolitionists in 1797 that feelings were low in Virginia. Opponents of abolition saw a literate, mobile Black population as a threat to enslavers' ability to hold people in bondage. Any heady optimism from the talk of freedom and natural rights in 1776 and the 1782 Manumission Act had faded. Legal paths to freedom were disappearing, but the hope for freedom had taken root.

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[70] Henrico County Records, Mixed Records, Vol 2–3, 1766–1852, via Ancestry.com, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1652–1900; Probate date 15 Feb 1797.

[71] Henrico Monthly Meeting, Minutes, 1757–1780, Eighth month, 1778, p. 141, accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2189/images/42483_1821100519_4111-00141?pId=1101783502.

Section 6. In the web of the conspiracy 1800

Amid a deluging rainstorm on the evening of August 30, 1800, members of the militia responded to reports of a slave uprising in progress. In the next few days, word spread that there had indeed been a plan to revolt that had washed out, along with the roads and bridges. Conspirators were hunted down and arrested.[72] By September 11, six men were convicted and hanged. Trial testimony revealed a plot that encompassed rebels from several counties. Witnesses reported hundreds, even thousands, of recruits committed to a violent revolution to overthrow slavery. Ultimately, 36 of the convicted men were hung.

Of the first six men hanged, Samuel had a connection to five. The rebel Solomon was enslaved to Thomas Henry Prosser and grew up next to the Parson's old place. Ned was enslaved to Anne Parsons, nephew Woodson Parsons' widow. Will was enslaved by John Mosby, Anne Parsons' father. Michael was enslaved by Samuel's widowed sister, Judith Parsons Owen. Isaac was enslaved by William Burton, former neighbour, perhaps the son of the Deputy Sheriff who had seized assets from Samuel and William's estate in 1774. Among the men hanged the next day, two were from Roger Gregory's plantation, the one Samuel sold in 1785. The other three were from Thomas Henry Prosser's plantation. The 1782 nexus of Parsons' Quaker community had become the nexus of Gabriel's Conspiracy.

Governor James Monroe appointed Miles Seldon and Gervas Storrs to investigate the conspiracy. They returned the judgement that Gabriel was the lead instigator. When Gervas Storrs (1771–1848) was a child, he lived at Picquinoque. The son of Joshua and Susanna Storrs, Gervas was a birthright Quaker, his mother a Pleasants, and his father a transplant from Brighouse Monthly Meeting, Yorkshire, England.[73] As a child Gervas worshipped with the Parsons. Gervas was six when his father died. He was educated in England, then he returned to Virginia to claim the plantation and town property his mother and uncle had managed. Gervas inherited the Richmond inn where Mifflin and Parrish lodged as they lobbied for the 1782 Manumission Act. Gervas did not continue his Quaker membership into adulthood.

Samuel Pleasants Jr. (1772–1814) spent part of his childhood as a Quaker in Picquinoque. In 1800 he was the publisher of the newspaper The Virginia Argus, and of the political tract that landed James Thompson Callender in jail on charges of sedition. Callender went on to write jail house accounts of the conspiracy as the accused rebels cycled in and out of the jail.[74]

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[72] Nicholls, *Whispers*, pp. 156–158.

[73] Hinshaw, Quaker Encyclopedia vol VI, p 214; Gish, A. E. *Virginia Taverns, Ordinaries and Coffee Houses: 18th–Early 19th Century Entertainment Along the Buckingham Road*, Westminister Md.: Heritage Books, 2009, pp. 145–150; Torrence, Valentine Papers, IV, p. 2293; Nash, Notes on Journey to Virginia.

[74] Torrence, Valentine Papers, IV, p. 2295; Index of Virginia Printing-Samuel Pleasants, Jr., accessed 15 August 2025. https://old.lva.virginia.gov/virginiaprint/bios/bio.php?id=331.

The Parsons and Mosby families had old ties. A Mosby family's forebear, Edward Mosby was an uncle of Joseph Parsons' first wife.[75] White Oak Swamp Meeting met in Edward Mosby's house, until the meeting contracted him in 1722 to build the first White Oak Swamp Meeting House. He worshiped with Quaker families that grew rich, including Pleasants, Woodsons, and Ladds. Edward left the Quakers, likely disgruntled, after delays and disputes about paying him for building the meeting house. Edward did not become rich. Some of his children moved west to Half Sink, others to Goochland.

In Samuel's time, Mosbys were neighbours. Anne Parsons (Woodson Parson's widow) was a Mosby. Samuel's niece, Martha Owen, married Joseph Mosby in 1796. Anne Parson's nephew, Mosby Sheppard, and older brother, William Mosby, received the information that betrayed the conspiracy.[76] Several Mosbys, as sheriffs, carried out the orders to hang the convicted men.

Among the magistrates at the Henrico trials, Pleasants Younghusband, was the son of the unhappy marriage between Robert Pleasants' cousin Mary and Isaac Younghusband. In his 1795 will, Isaac railed against his wife, Mary's, financial support for Quakers. Attempting to disown her, he wrote 'I thought her a whore the first ten minits I was in bed with her.' Soon after the conspiracy trials, Samuel's widowed stepdaughter, Elizabeth T. Pleasants, married Pleasants Younghusband.[77]

The landowning families had webs of connections. Quakers did not live in isolated circles, especially as family members left the Society and integrated into the non-Quaker community. The enslaved and free Black families were deeply connected as well. Often enslavers' wills reveal enslaved families' ties and give clues to family separation and changed destinies. So much depended on the religion, business sense, and moral compass of the heirs. Quakers had made freedom possible for some; Gabriel inspired his followers to believe freedom was possible for all.

Section 7. The web of connections

In 1768, Woodson Parson was deeded ownership of Moses. In the 1774 guardian report, Samuel Parsons called Moses a boy. A rough guess is that he was born about 1760. In Woodson's 1797 will he directed his executors to sell 'my man Moses.' Moses would have been 37. Suppose Samuel decided strangers should not hold Moses in bondage.

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[75] Woodson, H. M., *Historical Genealogy of the Woodsons and Their Connections, Part I*, self-published, 1915, repr. The Apple Manor Press, nd. pp. 27, 33; Hinshaw, Quaker Encyclopedia, VI, pp. 199–200.

[76] Torrence, Valentine Papers, IV, pp. 2275–2279; Nicholls, Whispers, pp. 56–57.

[77] Gish, A. E., *Virginia Taverns*, 109–113; Leatherwood, D. *Acrimony: The Younghusband Brothers at the Dawn of American Independence*. Reston, Va: self-published, 2024.

Suppose Samuel paid Woodson's estate in order to take legal possession of Moses. Then, with the help of Joseph Woodson, got Moses a job at the coal pits. Perhaps Moses contracted to repay Samuel. Michael Nicolls described the conflicting testimony about Moses, Parsons, and Woodson:

> A man named Moses is named three times by Gilbert, though never prosecuted. On the Foster list of 9 September, he appears as 'living at the Coal Pitts of Tuckahoe'... Moses was initially described as belonging to Samuel Parsons, but that was corrected to Joseph Woodson of Goochland, which could be at the mines. In a third statement, dated 23 September, Gilbert reasserted the ownership of Samuel Parsons and said Moses was to become free 'at a certain age.' It is possible they are all the same man.[78]

The name Moses was common; this is not proof these are all the same person. Perhaps Woodson's Moses was never freed. Either way, Moses' status as free or enslaved hung on the dynamics of a Quaker family that was divided over slavery.

Section 8. Samuel's final years 1800–1820

The milling partnership between Samuel Parsons, Joseph Anthony, and Thomas Ladd ended in dispute around 1801. Samuel continued a mercantile business with his son, but in the last ten years of his life, his businesses were overcome with debt. He and his son dissolved their partnership. Samuel was forced to sell two downtown lots. The creditors were his former mill partner, Thomas Ladd, and his father, Amos Ladd. Other creditors forced the sale of properties on the turn basin.[79]

Samuel's son, Samuel Pleasants Parsons, continued as a merchant. More famously, he became the Prison Superintendent of the new, massive penitentiary in downtown Richmond. Through him, some memory of the original Virginian Quakers lives on. Samuel's 1820 obituary follows:

> Departed this life at his son's, near this city, on the 25th last. SAMUEL PARSONS, (an old and respectable member of the society of Friends) after a short illness which he bore with that resignation characteristic of the true christian. From early life he was a strong advocate for those principles set forth in the declaration of independence

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[78] Nicholls, *Whispers*, p. 163.

[79] *Richmond Enquirer*, 29 June 1810, 19 October 1810, via Newspapers.com, accessed 16 August 2025. https://www.newspapers.com/article/richmond-enquirer-sale-parsons/168368366/; https://www.newspapers.com/article/richmond-enquirer/168369166/.

> and the Virginia Bill of Rights, 'that all men are by nature equally free.' ... [ellipses in original] Under this influence he was amongst first in Virginia convinced of the injustice of slavery, and emancipated those that he inherited coeval with the law, permitting the African race to enjoy those rights endowed by nature to all mankind.[80]

There are possible traces of the enslaved people Parsons freed. In Henrico County Personal Property tax rolls, Pompey Parsons, FN (free negro) appeared in 1789 with two horses and 5 head of cattle.[81] A Pompey was in Joseph Parsons estate inventory 20 years earlier. In 1784, Josiah, Joseph Parsons Jr's second oldest son, freed Pompey by deed.[82] In 1802 Make Parsons FN had one horse. In 1803 Tabitha Parsons FN was listed owning one slave over 16 and one horse. In 1811 Tabitha had 18 ½ acres on Turnpike Road. In 1782, Samuel freed a Makey born in 1762, Tabitha in 1771.[83] Charles Dilsey, alias Parsons, emancipated his wife in 1792.[84]

Nancy, born in 1760, was freed in 1782. Was she Nancy Parsons, 'a free woman of colour,' who was arrested in the early 1800s in Richmond? The first arrest was for stabbing 'Nelly a mulatto female slave'. The second for running a disorderly house with men and women, 'drinking, whoring, tippling, and otherwise misbehaving themselves'. The third arrest for running a faro bank.[85] Near Half Sink, the Sheppard Family's Meadow Farm is preserved as a park, with an interpretive centre, 'Parsons Community Center,' named after the family of enslaved people on the plantation in the 1800s. Nancy Parsons of Caroline County was the matriarch. Is this Nancy related to other Henrico Parsons?

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[80] Richmond Enquirer, Samuel Parsons Obituary, March 28, 1820. Library of Congress website accessed 15 August 2025. https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024735/1820-03-28/ed-1/?sp=3&r=0.791,0.692,0.208,0.113,0.

[81] Schreiner-Yantis. Personal Property 1787, Henrico, p. 1077.

[82] Pompy (alias: Pompey) Deed of Emancipation, Henrico County, May 1784, Richmond, Va.: Library of Virginia, accessed 15 August 2025. https://rosetta.virginiamemory.com/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE3757569.

[83] Henrico County Personal Property Tax 1782–1814, Richmond, Va.: Library of Virginia, Microfilm reel 171; Land tax 1799–1816, Richmond, Va.: Library of Virginia reel 143. Accessed 15 August 2025, https://freeafricanamericans.com/henrico.htm.

[84] Free African American, Henrico County abstracts, accessed 15 August 2025. https://freeafricanamericans.com/virginiafreeafter1782.htm.

[85] Parsons, Nancy. Commonwealth Cause, 1818 accessed 16 August 2025 https://rosetta.virginiamemory.com/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE3680433; Parsons, Nancy Commonwealth Cause, 1816, accessed 16 August 2025, https://rosetta.virginiamemory.com/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE3683014; Parsons, Nanney (alias Naney, Nancy) Commonwealth Cause 1811, accessed 16 August 2025, https://rosetta.virginiamemory.com/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE3684434 *Virginia Untold: The African American Digital Collection*, Richmond, Va.: Library of Virginia.

Section 9. Natural Rights, Revolution, and Quakers

In the aftermath of the conspiracy trials, newspapers debated whether talk of 'Liberty and Equality and the Rights of Man' had given enslaved people dangerous ideas. Blame was cast at southerners, particularly Francophiles like Presidential candidate Thomas Jefferson. Liberty and equality became a partisan issue.[86] Journalists then, and to a large degree, historians of the era, have overlooked that Quakers, deeply entwined in the Richmond community, were advocating for freedom and the natural rights of all people during the lead up to the War of Independence and through the decades in which hopes for freedom became frayed.

In Richmond, Warner Mifflin had lobbied for the manumission act referring to the founding documents' support for natural rights;[87] Parsons' obituary emphasised the universality of natural rights as stated in the Declaration of Independence. The Virginia Yearly Meeting's 1779 statement against slavery is a passionate defence of natural rights. Many Quaker-written manumission documents gave natural rights as the justification for freeing people.

The language of United States founding documents was parsed not to apply to all people. The 20 years following the American War of Independence dashed hopes of the enslaved and abolitionists that the American Revolution would bring freedom for all people. The limited reach of private manumissions, and the subsequent legal roadblocks, meant that enslaved people in Virginia had fewer legal pathways to freedom in 1800 than in 1782. Some enslaved men reached a boiling point in 1800 and conspired to wage a revolution for all people to be free, intending to spare Quakers, as friends of freedom.

Virginian Quakers have been largely overlooked in both the transformation of The Religious Society of Friends into an abolitionist faith and in the planting of hope for universal freedom in the largest, wealthiest, slave state in the United States. Virginia Quakers who inherited enslaved people in the mid to late seventeenth century had to transform the economic lives of their families and the people they inherited. Those who chose not to do so left the Society and merged into the wider community. Samuel Parsons remained a Quaker and devoted great effort to fulfil the values and discipline of his faith. This study of his life and community illustrates that though the once significant Henrico Monthly Meeting was fading by 1800, there was a time that their actions offered hope and freedom for some born into bondage.

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[86] Nicholls, M. L., 'Holy Insurrection: Spinning the News of Gabriel's Conspiracy,' The Journal of Southern History 78/1 (2012), pp. 37–68, accessed 15 August 2025 https://www.jstor.org/stable/23247456.

[87] Nash, *Warner Mifflin*, p. 120.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.