

Francis Makemie, Presbyterian Pioneer

By Kirk Mariner

An elderly woman died near Jenkin's Bridge in 1788, and a part of her will read:

"I Give the two Pictures of Father and Mother to Samuel Wilson."¹

If these two antique pictures were still in existence today they would be not merely valuable but priceless. For the woman who owned them was Anne Makemie Holden, and the "Father" and "Mother" that they depicted were none other than Francis Makemie (1635?-1708), the "Father of American Presbyterianism," and his wife Naomi Anderson Makemie.

In 1680 the Presbyterians of Scotland received an appeal from William Stevens, who lived in what is now Worcester County, Maryland, for a Presbyterian minister to come to the Eastern Shore. The call inspired young Irish-born Francis Makemie to enter the ministry. He was ordained in 1682, booked passage to America in 1683, and after several years in which he pursued various business interests settled in Accomack County in 1687.

Makemie chose Onancock as his home, married Naomi Anderson of that town, and with the backing of her affluent father became a successful tradesman and landowner. Business was his main pursuit (it took him to Barbados in the West Indies for six years) and ministry a sideline until in 1699 he registered as a minister—the second "dissenter" to do so in Virginia—and began holding services at his two residences, in Onancock, and on Holden's Creek in upper Accomack County. He built no church, but became the pastor of Rehobeth in Maryland, the church just across the line that had called for a minister back in 1680.

In 1706 Makemie was instrumental in organizing the first presbytery in America, and he served as its moderator at its first meeting in Philadelphia. Shortly thereafter he undertook a preaching tour to the North, promoting the new denomination, when in 1707 he was catapulted into prominence by being arrested in New York for preaching without a license. His trial was highly publicized, and his acquittal seen to this day as a landmark decision in the evolution of religious liberty in America. Bad health soon forced him to return home, and there in 1708 he died at his home on Holden's Creek.²

Where and when in this busy life the portraits of Makemie and his wife were painted is not known, perhaps in Philadelphia or New York after he had become financially secure. Almost nothing is known about the paintings. In his daughter's will they sound like a matched set, and the reminiscences of those who saw them suggest that they were in color, so they may have been oil paintings. Makemie died in 1708, so if his portrait were painted from life it was undoubtedly almost a century old by the time of his daughter's death in 1788.³

Samuel Wilson, who inherited the pictures, lived in Somerset County, owned land in Accomack County, and was a friend and fellow Presbyterian of Mrs. Holden.⁴ From his family the portraits passed into the hands of Stephen Bloomer Balch, a Presbyterian minister who served in Snow Hill.⁵ In retirement Balch moved to Georgetown, the oldest section of Washington, D.C., and there in his home the two portraits hung among an extensive collection of books and papers until one night in 1831 Balch's house caught fire, and he and his wife barely managed to escape with their lives. Among the treasures that went up in flames was the only known true likeness of Francis Makemie.⁶

Two artists later drew from their imagination to produce "likenesses" of Makemie. The first was Henry Alexander Ogden (1856-

1936), a Philadelphia-born artist and illustrator who specialized in the drawing of military uniforms. Ogden painted Makemie's most celebrated moment: his appearance before Lord Cornbury in New York during the celebrated trial of 1707. The painting, a watercolor, hangs today in the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia. It has been frequently reproduced, and in 1982 the Irish government reproduced it fully a million times when it became the basis for Makemie's portrait on a postage stamp.⁷



Francis Makemie's Trial before Lord Cornbury
This painting by Henry Alexander Ogden became the basis for Ireland's 1982 Stamp

Alexander Stirling Calder (1870-1945) a sculptor from a family of sculptors (he followed his father into the field, and his son Alexander Calder became world famous for his "mobile" sculptures), produced another likeness of Makemie for the facade of the Witherspoon Building in Philadelphia, erected in 1896. Like Ogden's painting, Calder's statue is now at the Presbyterian Historical Society.⁸ It too has been reproduced, much less often but much more familiarly for the peninsula, for it is the basis for the two Makemie Monuments on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.



Ireland's 1982 Stamp
marking the 300th anniversary of Makemie's ordination

In 1908 a statue to Makemie was dedicated on the site of Makemie's home near Sanford in upper Accomack County.⁹ The statue bears no signature, and in all the materials printed about

Makemie and his Eastern Shore monument no mention is made of the artist who produced it. It seems likely that the Presbyterians simply hired a stonecutter to copy the Calder statue, and that the Accomack County version is not the work of a master sculptor but of a tradesman, perhaps a carver of tombstones. Sarah B. Smith, the Onancock-born sculptor who restored the statue in 1984, points out its uneven workmanship: a head carved with more skill than the rest of the statue, differing sleeve styles, a disparity in the size of the two hands (somewhat but not fully eliminated by Smith's restoration). Though the design is Calder's, the work is that of an unknown, and lesser, artist.¹⁰



Francis Makemie Statue
Accomack, Virginia

In 1984 this statue, having suffered from neglect and vandalism at its original site on Holden's Creek, was moved to Accomack and restored, and since that year has stood behind Makemie Presbyterian Church in that town. The pedestal on which it remained at Holden's Creek, and in 2001 it received a new statue, cast in bronze from the older stone version. There is one curious similarity in the two modern depictions of Makemie. In both Ogden's painting and Calder's statue the pose that Makemie strikes is virtually the same. In each, he holds a Bible in his right hand and, as if left-handed, with his left reaches upward to point or to bless. In each work also, more to be expected, he wears the "Geneva robe," black with white tabs at the neck.

Are these similarities by coincidence, or design? Neither artist, certainly, could have consulted the lost portrait that showed Makemie as he really looked, for Ogden was born 25 years and Calder 39 years after it went up in flames. But either or both of them could have consulted with those who had seen it. One person who remembered the lost portrait was the daughter of Stephen Balch, and the Eastern Shore author Littleton P. Bowen interviewed her before he published his book *The Days of Makemie* in 1885. Half a century after the loss of the portrait she could still remember the face in it: "the intellectual forehead crowned with brown locks, the fair complexion, the expressive blue eyes [and] mien of a true Irish

gentleman" in a Geneva gown.¹¹ Did she remember also a pose—left hand raised, right hand holding a Bible—in which an earlier artist had painted Makemie as he really looked?

Today Francis Makemie raises his hand—the left one—over the old monument grounds and over a safer location in Accomac behind the church that bears his name. It has been centuries since anyone could say with certainty what this renowned resident of the Shore looked like, but the man if not the face is far from forgotten on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

¹ *Accomack Wills 1788-1794*, p. 16. *Stratton Nottingham, Wills and Administrations of Accomack County, Virginia, 1663-1800* (Onancock: Published by the author, 1931), p. 289. "Records of Accomack County, Virginia to The Rev. Francis Makemie," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 4 (December 1907), p. 194.

² Mariner, *Revival's Children*, pp. 7-9

³ Boyd S. Schlenker, *The Life and Writings of Francis Makemie* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1971), pp. 115-128. Whitelaw, pp. 1257, 1278, 1287, 1293, 1294.

⁴ H.P. Ford, "Francis Makemie's Picture," *The Westminster*, 16 May 1908, p. 10.

⁵ I. Marshall Page, *Old Buckingham by the Sea on the Eastern Shore of Maryland* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1936), p. 79

⁶ Ford, p. 10

⁷ *Who Was Who in America* (Chicago: A.N. Marquis Co., 1942), vol. 1, p. 912. See also brochure published by the Philatelic Service of Ireland to accompany the Makemie issue, 1982, in the author's collection.

⁸ *Who Was Who in America*, vol. 2, p. 97. Correspondence with Ms. Mary Plummer of the Presbyterian Historical Society, 12 February 1986. Calder's statue is depicted in the frontispiece of Schlenker's biography.

⁹ Whitelaw, p. 1284. See also special issue of *Journal of Presbyterian History* 4 (December 1908), an entire number on the Makemie Monument.

¹⁰ Telephone interview with Sarah B. Smith of Charlottesville and Rev. William Plonk of Onancock, 24 February 1986.

¹¹ Littleton Purnell Bowen, *The Days of Makemie, or The Vine Planted* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1885), pp. 79-80, 521

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