

Genealogist investigates story of Francis Makemie

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From left, Moody "M.K." Miles, Mark Fisher, Fitz Godwin and Joe Boggs examine one of the tombstones in the Boggs family cemetery on Matchatank Creek near Cashville. The graveyard is on property once owned by the Rev. Francis Makemie in 1683. His nephew, William Boggs, is believed to be buried nearby. Joe Boggs is related to Makemie through the Boggs line. / BRICE STUMP/THE DAILY TIMES

GROTON'S, Va. -- His house is gone, his portrait burned, his farm divided and sold years ago. Even his grave is lost.

"I wondered if the old man had descendants still living on the Shore," Mark Fisher of Groton's in Accomack County said. That "old man" was the Rev. Francis Makemie, the "Father of American Presbyterianism," whose home and gravesite along Holden's Creek is a short distance from Fisher's home in Groton's. The historic site, known as Makemie Monument Park, is now under the care of the Francis Makemie Society.

Makemie (1658-1708), from County Donegal in Ireland, came to the Eastern Shore of Virginia in 1683. He married Naomi Anderson, whose father was a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses and who once owned all of Saxis Island. Yet, like many historical mysteries, there are strange twists and turns.

In Makemie's case, there would be no direct descendants. Makemie, Fisher said, had two daughters, Elizabeth (1695-1708) and Anne (1702-1788). One died when she was 13 and the other would marry three times and have no children.

As Makemie didn't father any male children, Fisher ruled out the possibility of finding Makemie's relatives, bearing his name, in the phone book.

"How many people on the Shore could claim being a relative of one of the most famous and influential religious leaders in America?" he asked.

To get the answer, Fisher turned to his friend and fellow society member, history researcher and genealogist Moody "M. K." Miles for help.

"M. K. Miles is the Sherlock Holmes of Eastern Shore genealogy," Fisher said. "If anyone could find out who the relatives are, and how they fit together, living and dead, it would be him."

Miles, who has researched the genealogy of many Eastern Shore families for more than 30 years, is the author of the "Miles Files" (espl-genealogy.org/MilesFiles/index.htm) at the Eastern Shore Public Library, which has a list of 60,000 names.

According to Miles, there was one male relative with Makemie when he came to the Shore. Makemie transported nine people into Virginia, one of which is believed to have been William Boggs (1673-1718). In his will of 1708, Makemie names Boggs as a "kinsman."

"This was a term used at the time meaning a niece or nephew in today's terminology," Miles explained.

William Boggs, Miles surmised, was the son of an older sister of Makemie.

"We do not know her name, or the name of her husband," Miles said; "all we know is they had a son, William, that Makemie brought with him from Ireland to America."

In her will of 1787, Makemie's daughter, then Ann Holden, named John, Francis and Joseph Boggs -- the grandsons of William Boggs -- as heirs to her land holdings along Matchatank Creek, near Cashville, in Fooke's Neck.

"The Rev. Makemie had patented a lot of land down there," Miles said, "and it stayed in the family until his daughter died and left it to the Boggs boys."

None of the property is now thought to remain in Boggs family hands.

"Makemie lived for a time on the Matchatank property, but eventually moved north to Holden's Creek (Groton's area) and apparently the Boggs nephew remained in the Matchatank Creek-Cashville area on land eventually owned by Makemie's daughter," Miles said.

Fisher and Miles knew that Boggs was a familiar name on the Shore and still is in the Cashville-Onancock area.

"It seems most people do not know that Makemie has all these relatives living around here," said Fisher, founder of the society. "I thought we should investigate this and let people know. Even many in the Boggs family don't know about their connection to Makemie."

It was an odd coincidence and chance meeting that prompted Fisher to get the ball rolling on the preacher's family history. He met, quite by chance, Joe Boggs of Onancock, almost in his own backyard.

"I met him one day when he was at Makemie's monument and he introduced himself. He did a lot of family research and knew he was a Makemie relative," Fisher said. "Makemie has no descendants, but he has a hell of a lot of relatives. The more we talked, the more I thought that there was a story here."

It was Boggs, who works for VDOT, and others who had discovered a tombstone in a roadside ditch about a year ago that had been stolen from a graveyard east of Princess Anne. Fisher, Miles and fellow society member, attorney Fitz Godwin, worked with Boggs and others to return and reset the missing stone. All the principals involved in the search for Makemie relatives knew each other through a chance discovery.

Soon after their meeting, Boggs carried Fisher and Godwin to the Matchatank Creek site and showed them the Boggs family graveyard.

"I knew Mark wanted to know where the graves were for the early Boggs family, and I knew they were on the farm where my great-great grandfather lived," Boggs said. "Makemie lived around there, but I'm not sure where, because they are several old house sites back in the woods and marsh on the south side of Matchatank Creek. I think Makemie lived on land on the north side of the creek."

Soon after their initial meeting, Miles began his genealogical research connecting Makemie's sister to Joe Boggs.

"Much of the work of tying Joe Boggs to Makemie's (unnamed) sister has been done over the years," he said.

Miles worked with fellow genealogist, Gail Walczyk, who happens to also be a William Boggs descendant.

Not only is today's Joe Boggs now able to trace his line back to the preacher's older sister, but, through Miles, has established that he is descended through four of the first settlers of Jamestown in 1624, -- Anthony West, Adam Thorowgood, Francis Mason and John Fisher -- making him eligible to be a member of the prestigious First Families of Virginia organization.

"Not to mention that Fisher's mother, Benetta Dering, who has a well documented royal line throughout Europe," Miles said, "Joe has a lot of prominent ancestors. Yet many people on the Eastern Shore share the same family lines."

From the earliest years, there were instances when a Boggs was marrying a Boggs. Even in the 18th century, this was uncomfortable to some in the family.

"In his will of 1767, the first Makemie Boggs (1708-1768), who was born the year the Rev. Francis Makemie died, left his wife his land during her life and then to his son, Makemie Boggs, 'provided he never marry an own cousin and, in the event he does, then to my son William Boggs.' So this Boggs marrying a Boggs (on the Eastern Shore of Virginia) has evidently been going on for a few hundred years," said Miles, smiling.

"That's because transportation was hard back then," said Boggs, laughing.

"In the first 125 years after Makemie's death, 10 male descendants of the first William Boggs were named in honor of the Rev. Francis Makemie, being named Francis, Makemie or Francis Makemie Boggs," Miles said. "Considering the first William Boggs as being the first generation in America, the Joe Boggs, was is in the 10th generation of descent along the male line, is a seventh great-grandson of William Boggs and an eighth great-grandnephew of the Rev. Francis Makemie."

A lot of this information is new news for Joe Boggs. "Like everyone else, I really didn't get involved in researching family history until I got older. It was the last thing on my mind when I got married. My cousin, William Boggs, also did a lot of research on family genealogy, especially trying to find more Boggs graves," Boggs said.

Just what physical characteristics Boggs may have from inherited from the Makemie side of the family may remain a mystery. Since the Rev. Makemie's portrait was destroyed in a house fire year after his death, there is no known likeness of the preacher, businessman and planter.

Yet there is a body in stone that may suggest details. "His statue (originally placed at the Witherspoon Building in Philadelphia in 1896) at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia," said Godwin, "was sculpted according to the description provided by a woman who saw the original painting. It is considered a pretty good likeness of him. Our (bronze) statue at Makemie Monument Park near Groton's, was based on the likeness of the society's statue."

The cast stone statue at the historical society's headquarters was created by the famous sculptor Alexander Stirling Calder in the late 1890s. Yet the time between the death of Makemie in 1708, the burning of his portrait years later and the creation of Calder's statue in 1906 is a gap of more than 200 years, making it doubtful the features of Makemie in stone are anything more than conjecture. A granite, hand-carved replica of Calder's Makemie was commissioned by the society in 1906. In 1908, it was placed by the group on the supposed site of Makemie's graveyard and home, near Groton's in Accomack County.

Severely damaged by vandals in the 1970s, the replica was restored and moved to Francis Makemie Church in Accomac where it remains. In 2001, members of the Francis Makemie Society paid to have a bronze statue cast and installed on the pedestal of the original replica at Makemie Park.

"One day, when I was down to the park, I said to myself, 'My gosh, there's a striking resemblance between Joe and the statue of Francis Makemie.' "

Knowing Boggs' interest in family history and Makemie, Fisher and Godwin have encouraged him to be an active member of the Francis Makemie Society and have presented him with a lifetime membership in the organization. Miles and others contributed their work for free in an effort to further the understanding and preservation of Makemie's legacy in the area.

Now, thanks to the genealogical research, Boggs can now place history with names he has always heard.

To this day, said Boggs, 56, common first names for males in the family remain John, Francis and Joseph, just like it was when Ann Holden left land to Boggs males of the same name in 1787.

"I'm nothin' special," Boggs said. "Through family talks, I knew the Boggs line went back to Makemie, but didn't know exactly the whole story of how we were related. Now I know."

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