



Mark Fisher of the Francis Makemie Society examines a section of a century-old iron fence that once surrounded a statue of Francis Makemie, the Father of American Presbyterianism, that stood near Makemie's home. BRICE STUMP/THE DAILY TIMES

Written by

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GROTONS -- If it hadn't been for the quick action of Mark Fisher and Frank Young, a valuable piece of Presbyterian Church history would have probably ended up stolen by thieves and ended up in a junk yard smelter.

An iron fence, once encircling a granite statue of the Rev. Francis Makemie, "The Father of American Presbyterianism," was placed when the monument was erected on a site, now known as Makemie Park, just off Holden's Creek, near here in 1908.

"The eight sections formed a huge circle around the statue," Fisher said. "Each section is about 9 feet or more long and almost 8 feet high. The fence was placed to protect the Makemie statue, but it was so heavily vandalized in the 1970s that it was removed in 1984," Fisher said.

It was repaired and moved again to the Francis Makemie Presbyterian Church in Accomack, where it remains.

When Fisher and others organized the Francis Makemie Society in the mid-1990s, they commissioned an exact copy of the original statue to be made. Cast in bronze, it was placed on the original granite plinth at Makemie Park in 2001. The group spent years clearing trash and landscaping the park where Makemie's home once stood.

"When we first started cleaning it up in 1995, the fence was still there. Two sections were stretched and bent, but the other six sections and the gate were still intact. In 1996, we put the section in the woods behind Bill Lewis' house near here," he said, and that's where they stayed until a few months ago.

"We wanted to have the fence fixed," Fisher said. "Fitz Godwin, also involved with the society, and I went back in the woods looking for it and couldn't find it."

It was possible someone else had found what looked like junk and carted it away, something the two men didn't want to even consider.

"I saw Bill Lewis and told him we couldn't find it. He said he knew where it was, because it had been moved from where it was originally placed in 1996. 'I moved it farther back in the woods,' he told me. We went back and looked some more, and after a time found the fence under a layer of pine shats and leaves."

Despite the passage of 15 years, Fisher and Godwin found every section, including the gate. For safekeeping, the two decided to transport the fence from the Grotons area to Godwin's house in Onacock, about eight miles south of the park.

Now it's just a matter of getting it repaired, stabilized and put back.

"The man we've been talking to is Chris Beauchamp, the owner of Art Metal Inc. He said he will repair the fence, correct all the damage and have a missing finial replace. It will be cleaned, primed, repainted and then reinstalled for about \$6,000," said Fisher. "We aren't using money from donations made to support the society. We are trying to get money specifically just for this project."

While Fisher is leaning hard on several private donors, he is also preparing to ask, perhaps with a little arm twisting, the nine Presbyterian churches in three Lower Shore counties of Maryland to help out.

"Some have never given us a penny since we started restoring Makemie's monument and home site in 1995. We need help," Fisher said.

"Putting the fence back will keep someone from getting near the statue and messing with it," he said. "The Beauchamp man said this century-old fence is still in really good shape. I hope we can have the fence restored and reset by June for rededication ceremonies of the park."

The Rev. Dr. Donald Rising, of Wicomico Presbyterian Church in Salisbury and president of the Francis Makemie Society, said it still surprises him that the significant historical value of the Makemie site, to the Presbyterian church membership as a whole, is virtually unknown.

"I have been involved with the church all my life, and have been a pastor since 1973. But I never heard of Makemie Park and really knew little of Makemie until I came to Salisbury in 2007," Rising said. "I never thought I would someday head up an organization trying to preserve and maintain the site of his home and memorial." Makemie died in about 1705 and is believed to be buried along with family members on the park site.

With others, Rising is trying to spread the word on the site.

"We have a Web page now, <http://www.francismakemiesociety.org>, which also includes a link to the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia," he said.

While the Philadelphia-based society owns the Makemie site, 100 percent of the more than \$50,000 in donations needed to restore and maintain the site have been raised by the local Francis Makemie Society members.

Tax-exempt donations may be made to Francis Makemie Society at PO Box 361, Sanford, Va. 23426. Note "Fence Project" on the donation.

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