“Francis Makemie and the Early Church

Three hundred years ago in Philadelphia, the first presbytery met in the colonies. Of the probable attendees, Moderator Francis Makemie (c.1658–1707) is the most remembered. Considered by historians the father of organized American Presbyterianism, he was also a missionary, landowner, merchant, and early fighter for religious liberty. Born in Ireland, Makemie studied for the ministry in Glasgow, was ordained in Ulster, and then sent as a missionary to the American colonies.

Makemie arrived in 1683 and itinerated in North Carolina, Maryland, Virginia, and Barbados, serving existing congregations and starting new ones. Makemie also helped shape the arguments for religious liberty in America. Licensed in Virginia as a dissenting minister, Makemie accepted an offer to preach to Dutch and French Reformed congregations in New York City during a trip north in 1707. New York authorities jailed Makemie, eventually charging him with preaching without a civil license. Makemie participated in his own defense, citing his license from Virginia, as well as the 1689 Act of Toleration. The court acquitted Makemie, but assessed him the entire cost of his trial and imprisonment.

Makemie was freed from jail in time to attend the 1707 Presbytery meeting. He described the presbytery in a March 1707 letter: “...Our design is to meet yearly, and oftener, if necessary to consult the most proper measures, for advancing religion, and propagating Christianity, in our various Stations....”

Little documentary evidence remains of Makemie’s work; it lives on, however, in the many religious institutions he planted and in the concept of religious liberty, later codified in the Constitution.
Francis Makemie’s trial before Lord Cornbury. By Henry A. Ogden.

First surviving page of the Presbytery Minute book, 1707

Old Buttonwood, early home of First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia and likely site of the first presbytery meeting.

Makemie Memorial at Holden’s Creek, in Accomack County, Virginia
Buckingham Presbyterian Church, Berlin, Maryland, n.d. (RG 424)

Makemie Memorial Presbyterian Church, Snow Hill, Maryland, n.d. (RG 424)

Pitts Creek Presbyterian Church, Pocomoke City, Maryland
Photograph by Douglas E. Brinton, 1900 (RG 424)

Beaver Dam Presbyterian Church, Pocomoke City, Maryland
Pen and Ink drawing by Eliza B. Askin, 1983 (RG 424)
Communion Tokens from Wicomico Presbyterian Church (Rockawalkin), Salisbury, Maryland

Wicomico Presbyterian Church, Salisbury, Maryland
Photograph by Douglas E. Brinton, 1900 (RG 424)

Manokin Presbyterian Church, Princess Anne, Maryland, n.d. (RG 424)